Popular Understandings of Politics in Britain, 1937-2014

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Abstract

In a context of apparently recent disenchantment and disengagement from politicians, parties, and elections in Britain and certain other countries, this paper seeks to understand better what and how British citizens have thought about formal politics since the late 1930s. There is widespread alienation and withdrawal from formal politics in many countries at the present time (Hay 2007; Norris 2011; Stoker 2006). However projects to renew democracy have struggled because the causes for political disenchantment and disengagement are not clear. In this paper we use quantitative data (from historical survey data such as Gallup polls and the British Election Study) and qualitative data from the Mass Observation Archive directives on politics, combined in a mixed method approach, to start to develop answers to the following questions: What is the range of popular understandings of politics among British citizens? How have these changed over time? We first summarise longitudinal survey evidence of trends, fluctuations and cycles of public opinion regarding different aspects of formal politics. Secondly, we undertake qualitative analysis of responses to the Mass Observation Archive directives on politics (from 1945, 1950, 1996/7, 2010 and 2014). The findings are then reflected on in light of contemporary research on political disengagement.

The current conventional wisdom suggests that citizens are more disaffected with politics, and the practice of politics, than at any point in the post-war era. Some have argued that a 'perfect storm' has engulfed Britain's governing institutions (Richards et al. 2014), as the global financial crisis and the parliamentary expenses scandal, amongst others, unleashed a wave of contempt for the political classes that has not yet subsided and continues to be felt in the growth of support for parties outside the traditional cartel of the party system. This has been manifested in the high levels of negativity that are observed in survey after survey. Yet in spite of this sense of disaffection, we have distinctly little solid evidence of how popular understandings of politics among British citizens have changed or remained stable over time. According to some accounts, the problems of democracy are perennial, recurring at different points in time with different faces and different labels. In the United States and the 1960s and 1970s the problem of democracy was diagnosed as of alienation – of political powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness and isolation – which left many with the sense of a system under threat of paralysis and disorder (e.g. Finifter 1970; Miller 1974; Critin et al. 1975). In Britain the ungovernable 1970s led to inquests into the capacity of the state to assert social and economic control in the face of external shocks and civil disturbances. The cross-national diagnoses of democratic crisis have focused on declines in regime support and participation (e.g. Nye et al. 1997, Norris 1999, Pharr and Putnam 2000, Dalton 2004, Norris 2011).

While there is plenty of evidence of a withdrawal of support from the institutions of formal politics in Britain and other countries dating at least to the 1960s, our understanding of popular views of politics are fundamentally limited by the questions that have been asked of citizens in representative surveys at different points in times. This matters in two ways. It first sets the boundaries of what we can know about public opinion in absolute terms, since it is impossible to retrospectively reconstruct measures of attitudes. This means that if no survey asked about the propensity of politicians to lie or take bribes prior to 1975 (for example), we

simply cannot tell whether there has been a long-term shift that makes the public more or less distrusting. As a consequence, our understanding of popular understanding of politics is inevitably through the lens of survey researchers of the day, and the set of norms, research questions and expectations that motivated them to put questions into the field. To track long-term trajectories of public attitudes towards formal politics we therefore need to reflect on the successive generations of survey question that have been asked of citizens at different points in time. Secondly, the obvious benefit of repeated cross-sectional surveys of public opinion is that they provide insight into long-term trends in popular views on politics. These measures are, however, limited to the narrow vocabulary of survey researchers and do not allow for more diverse repertoires of expression towards politics. Statements of 'approval', 'trust' and 'satisfaction' may provide measures of generalised positive or negative feeling towards the political system and political class, but may not pick up the changing way in which people talk about politics and the intensity of rejection of contemporary politics.

This paper considers the trajectory of political discontentment in Britain through two methodological approaches. The first considers evidence from survey research, at both the aggregate and individual level, dating back as far as 1937 – using predominantly opinion poll data from the Gallup Organisation and Ipsos-MORI and survey data from the various waves of the British Election Study between 1963 and 2014-15 and the British Social Attitudes Survey between 1983 and 2013. In this, it both examines long-term trends in public attitudes towards different aspects of British politics and government, and also compares determinants of negativity towards politics at different points in time (where individual-level data permits). The second gathers data on citizen voices from the Mass Observation Archive (MOA) based at the University of Sussex and analyses them to establish popular understandings of politics in Britain for the immediate post-war period (1945) and for the current period (2014). In this paper we specifically focus on what MOA diarists thought about *formal politics*, specifically

as regards their orientation towards institutions (government, leaders, and parties) and actors (that is, individuals and the behaviour of the political class as a whole). As such we combine descriptive analysis of quantitative survey data with qualitative exploration of the content of MOA diaries.

Thinking about Political Alienation

Political alienation is a complex and politically salient topic that justifies substantial investigation. In his discussion of political support for political systems – the other side of the coin to the discussion of political alienation and developed during the same time period – David Easton (1965) makes a well-known distinction between specific and diffuse support. The former is about support for the government of the day, its leaders and its policies. For Easton, political discontent can only come about in one of two forms which are the converse of his understanding of political support. Political discontent could be expressed against the government of the day and its behaviour or it could lead to a rejection of the basic principles of the political system. Yet discontent has an additional dimension; alienation from the operation of the political system that stretches way beyond any judgement that a different government or leader would automatically make politics better. Political alienation matters because there are three pillars of political support in a liberal democracy not just two. Only one pillar remains clearly supported by citizens – democracy and its inalienable political rights. The performance of the government of the day is often judged negatively (and as we show later is increasingly so). But the evidence presented in this article is primarily focused on that third element: *alienation from the operation of the political system.*

Alienation from how politics works can take a variety of forms (Finifter 1970). The first form of alienation refers to the sense among citizens that they cannot influence political outcomes because they lack the capacity to do so. Politics operates at the behest of powerful

interests not those of "ordinary" citizens. The second construct of alienation refers to the notion that the political system is full of wrongdoers; politics is being run at the behest of those who do not observe common sense norms and standards of conduct. Citizens know what is right, but their political masters either do not know how to behave or, as is more likely, are always knowingly flouting the rules. Here the concerns are with corruption and unethical behaviour. Alienation in this third form stems from a general concern that politics and the way that politicians behave makes little sense – and that political decisions are perceived as being unpredictable. The political system operates according to rules and practices that appear to be unfathomable to most citizens and so offers choices where the individual has no basis for making a decision.

The fourth form of alienation emerges because some citizens systematically reject prevailing values and norms expressed through the political system and more particularly by the political establishment. A potential left-wing alienation from the capitalist norms and values dominant in politics of liberal democracies is matched by the potential for right-wing populism that rejects the "politically correct" liberal norms of the political establishment. The fifth and final form of alienation could be expressed by the alienation of the individual from the collective nature of democratic citizenship. One argument for the emergence of this form of alienation is connected to the rise of consumerism in society and an attendant focus for individuals on self-serving materialism and self-actualisation that, in turn, is perceived as undermining values of citizenship expressed through solidarity, community, and collective action (Flinders 2012 comes close to this argument). For the individual "suffering" this form of alienation mainstream politics appears to be irrelevant to their lifestyle, circumstances, and future prospects.

As well as different mixes of the dimensions of alienation being more present in some periods than others another key issue is which groups are experiencing and expressing more

or less alienation from politics. We need to understand which groups in society express alienation and whether similar types of groups express alienation from politics at different points in time or if rather the political system is failing to meet the demands of new types of citizens emerging as society changes. Is it critical citizens (Norris 1999) – most material and educated – that are leading the challenge to the practice of politics or are there other groups, who have been economically and culturally 'left behind' (Ford and Goodwin 2014), that are repeatedly at the heart of political alienation? All these conceptual challenges of course have to be addressed in the context of the available empirical data and it is to that task we now turn.

<u>Survey Data and Popular Understandings of Politics</u>

As we noted, our understanding of what the public thought about politics at particular moments in time is constrained by the set of questions that were asked by survey companies or academic researchers. These can be broadly divided up into six periods, which will next be outlined, alongside corresponding evidence of popular attitudes to politics among the British public: (1) the post-war era of great leaders and Cabinet government (1945-), (2) a period of growing reflection on performance of the democratic system (1963-), (3) the first crisis of the British governing system (1970-), (4) the rise of division and distrust (1979-), (4) standards in public life (1992-) and (6) valence, trust (again), institutions and the second crisis of Britain's governing system and the political class (1998-). It is important to note that these periods are neither mutually exclusive nor cleanly delineated at start and end points, but characterisations of the increasing prominence of certain sorts of survey measures regarding public opinion in different periods. Some of these periods can simply be captured through a figure plotting how public attitudes have changed according to a particular measure over time. Others require a qualitative exploration of the ranges of survey questions widely at use at particular moments in time. Importantly our characterisation differs from how one might identify the successive generations of electoral research in Britain, such as in the excellent reflection on the state of

the field in Curtice (1996). Our focus is very much on how attitudes on *formal politics* and political institutions, not voting behaviour per se, have been measured over time.

1. Great Leaders and the Era of Cabinet Government

Given that the first full national academic study of the electorate did not make an appearance before Butler and Stokes launched the British Election Study in 1963, we have a period of almost twenty years after the end of the war where we are reliant on polls carried out by the Gallup organization; with data on these drawn from King (2001); volumes of the original monthly *Gallup Political and Economic Index* (1960-2001), and the two volumes of George Gallup's (1976) *The Gallup International Public Opinion Polls, Great Britain, 1937-1975*, and individual-level datasets from the UK Data Service of wartime surveys conducted by the British Institute for Public Opinion (BIPO), the then name for Britain's affiliate of the US Gallup organization. These reveal that relatively few questions were asked of citizens in the aftermath of the Second World War that pertained to attitudes towards the functioning of democracy or the behaviour of politicians. Perhaps this reflected an understandable reaction to the war and the broad assumption that democracy was a good thing when contrasted with the alternatives.

During this period, Gallup dominated as the foremost commercial pollster and mainly asked questions regarding *specific* rather than diffuse support; with frequent survey questions fielded regarding voting intentions and public approval of government, prime ministerial and ministerial performance. As early as December 1938, BIPO asked "Are you satisfied with Mr Neville Chamberlain as Prime Minister?" finding an approval rating of 52% (and disapproval rating of 38%). Survey measures of opposition party leaders were only introduced during the 1950s, but have since become an essential feature of the political landscape. In October 1945, BIPO asked a variant of what would become the standard measure of *government approval*,

"At the present time, is the government doing its job well or badly?" This found that 59% of respondents thought the Atlee government was doing well and just 16% badly. As revealed in King (2001, pp.241-249), Gallup frequently asked about performance of individual ministers, with more than fifty poll questions regarding whether ministers in particular portfolios were doing a good job or not over the period between 1941 and the mid-1960s. Setting aside the high level of political knowledge this assumed of respondents, it importantly reflects a focus on Cabinet government during the period.[1]

What the data from this period (and beyond) reveal are two things. Firstly, extensive measurement of *specific* support was not matched by interest in the possibility of alienation from the political system itself. By focusing upon the role of party leaders and ministers in the operation of British government, this provides insight into popular understanding of what democratic politics involved. Secondly, the long-term trends in *specific* support offer support to claims that the electorate has become more alienated from political institutions in the form of government, the prime minister and party leaders. In Figures 1 and 2, below, it is evident from the linear trend line for approval has moved steadily downwards, while dissatisfaction has risen, interspersed by fluctuations at moments of crisis (e.g. around the time of the ERM crisis and Conservative Party disunity in the 1990s) and honeymoons (e.g. the New Labour landslide of 1997). Indeed, closer inspection of these figures highlights just how anomalous the Blair period was in terms of the short-lived pause from the inexorable march of political alienation. In 2015, net leader evaluations stand at a record low.

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[1] Later, in the 1970s, Gallup started asking whether particular ministers and backbenchers were seen as an 'asset' or 'liability' to their parties (see King 2001, pp. 252-255). This in part may have been a reaction to the polarizing influences of Enoch Powell for the Conservatives under Heath and Bennite figures in Labour under Wilson and Callaghan.

Fig 1. Specific Support, Government and Prime Ministerial Approval from 1945-2015
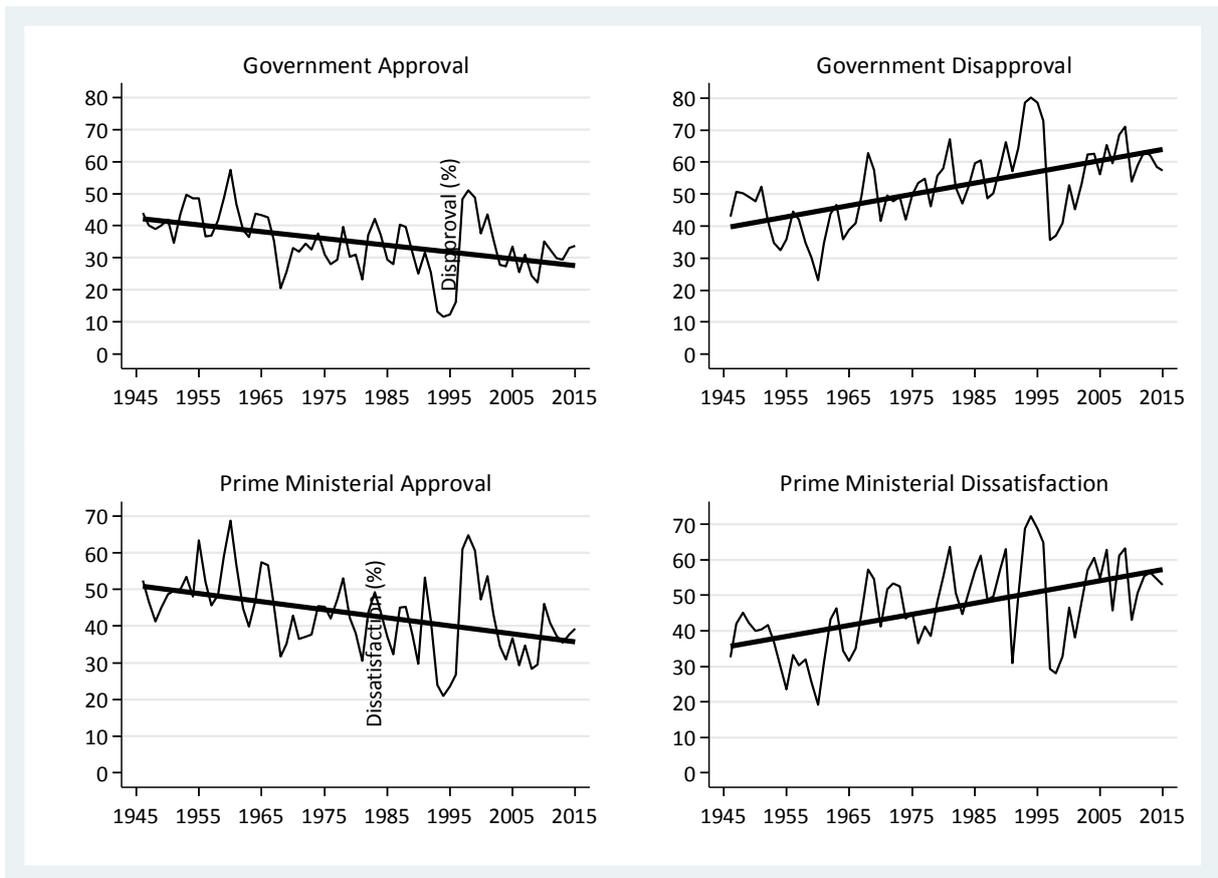

Fig. 2. Specific Support, Party Leader Ratings from 1955 to 2015
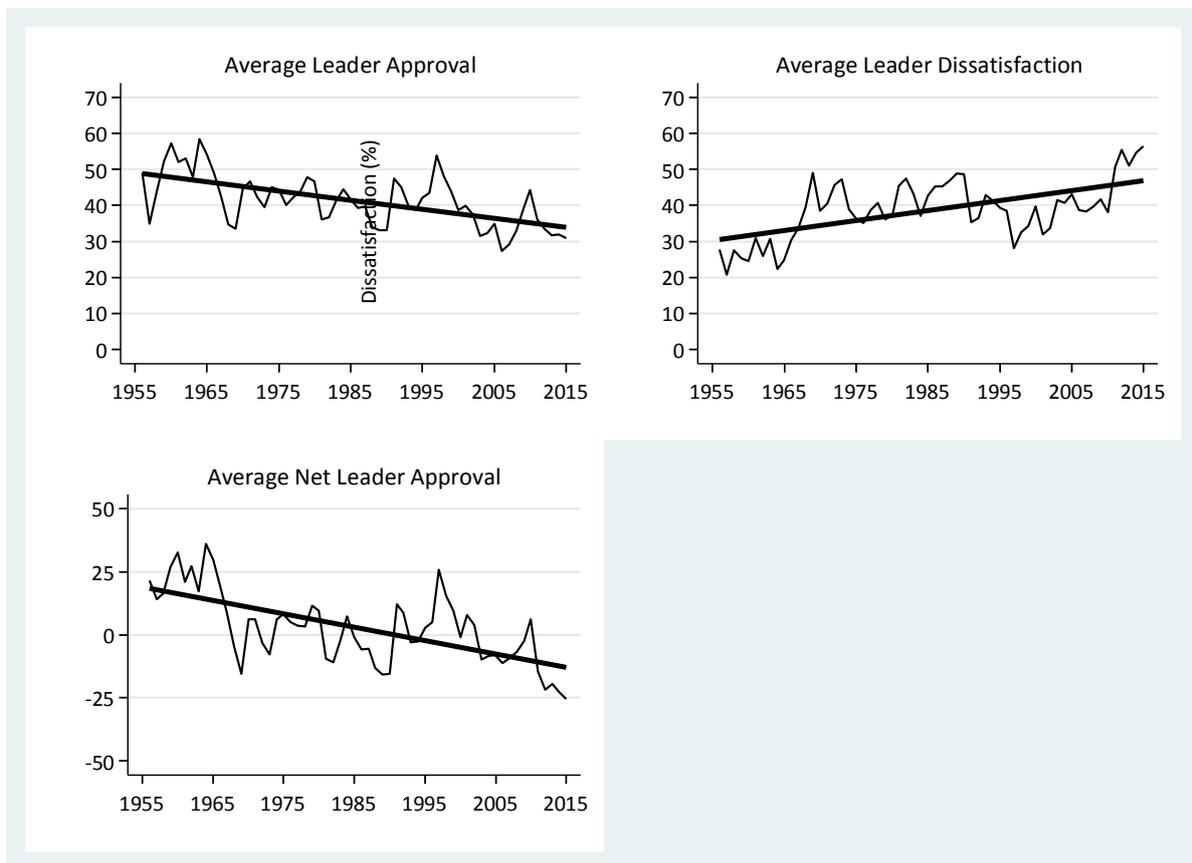
While most of our insights into popular opinion during the post-war period relate to measures of diffuse support, a rare exploration of our second type of alienation – the notion that politics is full of wrongdoers and self-seeking politicians – can be found in a survey conducted by Gallup (then BIPO) in June 1944. Remarkably, as war continued to rage across the globe, it asked people about their view on the motivations of politicians: "Do you think that British politicians are out merely for themselves, for their party, or to do their best for their country?" In itself, this tells us a lot about popular scepticism about the motivations and behaviours of politicians; that a polling firm would ask this question at the height of the Second World War points to an in-built scepticism among citizens in democracies.

Fig 3. MPs 'Out for Themselves'
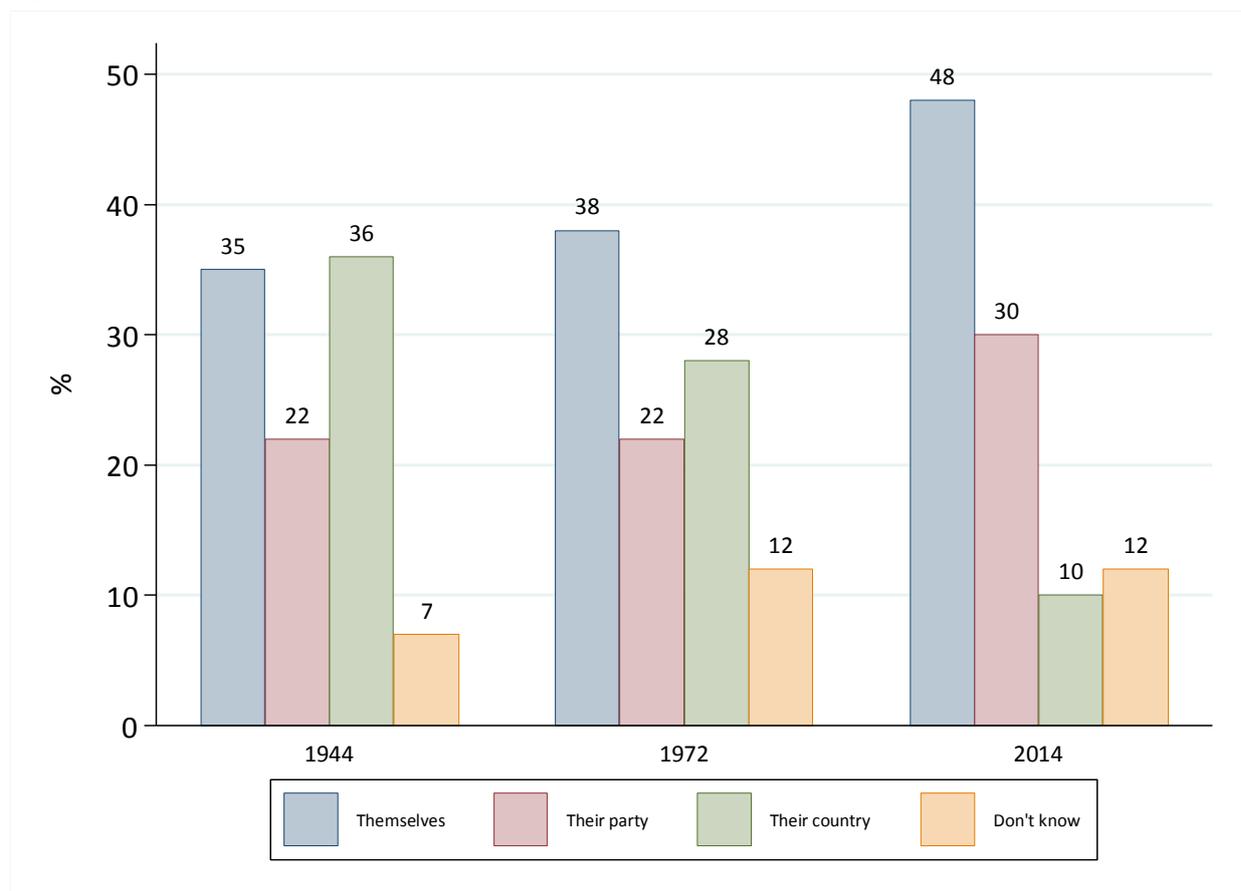
Source: YouGov/University of Southamton, 2,103 GB Adults, Fieldwork: 20-21 October 2014

Even in 1944, some 35% of respondents expressed agreement with this form of alienation, while 22% thought politicians were creatures of party. Subsequent repetitions of this question – in 1972 by Gallup and in 2014 by YouGov – revealed a growing level of disaffection with the ruling class. By 2014, almost half the British public believed politicians were "out merely for themselves" whereas just one in ten thought they were out to do the best for their country. Thus, while there may be something timeless about expressions of political alienation, either in the form of *specific* support or in the prevalence of beliefs that politicians are self-serving, the longitudinal data indicates that the post-war era was something of a high point for popular understandings of politics. Citizens may have never much liked politics or politicians, but the long-term trend in alienation is downwards.

2. *Performance of the Democratic System (1963-)*

The 1960s marked an important moment for understanding of the attitudes of citizens towards the democratic system, with the pioneering studies of electoral behaviour undertaken by Butler and Stokes (1969; 1974). Their 'Michigan' approach primarily was concerned with the affective orientation of voters towards parties (i.e. party identification), but also began to explore aspects of attitudes towards performance of the democratic system. Specifically, their first survey, fielded in 1963, explored our first form of political alienation, that citizens feel they are unable to influence decisions taken by government, asking: "how much do you feel the government pays attention to what the people think when it decides what to do?" as well as "How much attention do you think most MP's pay to the people who elect them when they decide what to do in parliament?" These questions revealed a substantial degree of support for the view that politics is not responsive to the concerns and interests of citizens, with 50% saying that government pays "not much" attention to what people think, 20% saying "some", and just 9% saying "a good deal" (with 22% don't knows). Views about MPs were rather less

negative, with 32% saying they paid "not much" attention to citizens, 28% "some", and 14% "a good deal" (with 27% don't knows). Even in the 1960s, then, considerable support can be found for our first construct of alienation.

Perhaps more interesting here is the open-ended response to the follow-up question asking citizens why they think government and MP's do or do not pay attention to them. Of those expressing an opinion about the reason why government *does not* pay attention to people, some 41% of responses can be characterised taking the view that "government is arrogant, blind, out for themselves, follows own wishes, just don't bother". Similarly, 29% took the view of MP's as not paying attention to citizens because they are "… arrogant, don't care what the people want, only interested in their own careers. Just out for themselves. Only interested just before or after elected." In both cases, this again reveals a substantial reservoir of negativity – in up to half of those responding – regarding the second construct of alienation, that politicians are self-interested and aloof from ordinary people.

Interestingly, at this time there was less popular disillusionment with the party system. Just 12% of people believed parties were "…just out for themselves, don't care what people want, just do what they want, government bound by party conferences". In contrast there was more positivity about how parties helped connect voters to government. Specifically, 31% of people took the view that the opposition party was crucial for holding government to account; such that it "informs public of other side, government's weaknesses, debates in public inform public, government has to answer in public, general value of opposition", and 12% that it was an important mechanism for conveying public opinion; "… parties, party conferences convey public opinion, present people's problems". Another section of the public, 19%, expressed the view that oppositions act as a *pressure valve*; "… is alternative government, can be change in parties if public wants it, without opposition would be dictatorship". In total nearly two-thirds

of respondents were more positively oriented to the party system – in contrast to the findings for government and MP's.

Turning away from these snapshots, we finally turn to the idea that political alienation in its different forms is more likely to be linked with particular groups in society. Olsen's (1968) seminal study of alienation in the United States found that feelings of *powerlessness* (akin to our first construct) were more common among lower educated, working class, low income, older and non-white groups. Political discontentment (akin to our second construct) also occurred more frequently among lower educated, low income, older and the 'old middle class' (i.e. small businessmen). In 1950s and 1960s America, this group were experiencing a state of *anomie* (Kornhauser 1959; Nelson 1968), squeezed by processes of economic change. In Table 1 we compare demographic predictors of measures of political discontentment and distrust in surveys from the 1960s and fielded more recently. The evidence is a little mixed, in part due to a couple of the later surveys having much larger sample sizes (meaning they are much more likely to reveal statistically significant relationships in the data), but offer some insights into which sorts of group hold which form of alienation and how this has changed over time. Firstly, the findings suggest that whereas in the 1960s men had been more likely to believe that politicians were self-serving, in recent years gender differences have vanished. In contrast, there was little difference between social classes in the 1960s, whereas the working class now are much more likely to think that politics is full of self-seekers and beholden to vested interests. Across all time periods, lower levels of education are a substantial predictor of political alienation. We see less clear evidence of variation by age. In fact the evidence is a little patchy for the surveys from 2013/14. Finally, across both time periods, but especially in the recent data, it is clear that London and the South are less alienated and discontented than the rest of Britain. People outside these areas are more distrustful of politicians and likely to believe that they are out for themselves.

Table 1. Logistic Regression of Demographic Predictors of Expressions of Political Alienation (Odds Ratios)

	Government arrogant, just out for themselves (BES '63)	Parties just out for themselves (BES '63)	MPs too removed, just out for themselves (BES '63)	Parties just out for themselves (BES '64)	Politicians out for themselves (YouGov '14)	Self-seeking (YouGov '13)	Distrust of MPs in general (BES '14)	Politicians only care about people with money in general (BES '14)
Male	**1.318**	**2.112**	**1.243**	1.146	1.121	0.776	**0.951**	0.999
	(0.150)*	**(0.438)****	**(0.158)+**	(0.140)	(0.099)	(0.133)	**(0.025)+**	(0.027)
55 and over	1.005	0.856	1.074	0.988	**1.405**	0.819	**0.808**	**0.790**
	(0.108)	(0.172)	(0.128)	(0.120)	**(0.130)****	(0.142)	**(0.022)****	**(0.022)****
Left school before 16	**1.472**	1.233	**1.332**	**1.895**	-	-	1.380	1.786
	(0.214)**	(0.313)	**(0.214)+**	**(0.318)****			**(0.059)****	**(0.081)****
Working Class (C2DE)	1.041	0.666	1.055	**1.327**	**1.355**	**2.277**	1.199	1.588
	(0.124)	(0.146)+	(0.140)	**(0.170)***	**(0.121)****	**(0.429)****	**(0.037)****	**(0.051)****
London and the South	**0.813**	1.357	1.189	**0.796**	**0.670**	0.816	**0.837**	**0.799**
	(0.088)+	(0.258)	(0.140)	**(0.098)+**	**(0.062)****	(0.140)	**(0.023)****	**(0.022)****
N	2,009	2,009	2,009	1,769	2,103	1,543	24,961	24,790
Pseudo R-squared	0.01	0.02	0.01	0.02	0.02	0.03	0.01	0.02

+ $p<0.1$; * $p<0.05$; ** $p<0.01$

3. The First Crisis of the British Governing System (1970-)

After this period of reflection on the performance of the democratic system, Britain entered an era 'overload' and 'ungovernability' awash with feelings of disappointment; with "its problems particularly intractable, its people increasingly bloody-minded" (King 1975, p. 284). As public expectations of the state had risen, so too disillusionment when it did not deliver. This period also coincided with the electoral change later observed in Sarlvik and Crewe's (1983) *Decade of Dealignment* with the electorate becoming more volatile (as was society and the economy more broadly) and less attached to parties. Survey measures about formal politics increasingly focused upon feelings towards politicians and local government, how Britain was governed, and the options for reform of the political system – especially in relation to decentralisation (providing interesting echoes of the past). In the first set of cases, in February 1974 the British Election Study asked respondents "Could you tell me the one which best describes how you feel about: politicians in Britain today?" providing a list of options that ranged from "very happy" to "very unhappy". Similar questions were repeated for parties, government and local government, tapping people's emotive engagement with specific institutions. These provide evidence of mixed feelings, though no overriding wave of political negativity (typically around 20% to 30% of people were dissatisfied or unhappy and around 20% to 30% were satisfied/happy with each of the different branches of government). It is perhaps just as important that these sorts of questions were starting to be asked, revealing a growing sense of alienation from political institutions and politicians among the public.

In the second set, the design and functioning of political institutions were coming under increasing scrutiny – in particular in relation to demand for decentralisation and the idea that political reform was the only way to solve Britain's problems. In the 1970 British Election Study, only a minority of opinion (32%) had thought British government was too centralised in London (with 62% content with things as they were). By October 1974, support

for shifting power from London to the regions and to local authorities stood at around 50%. Despite grumblings about Britain's governability, there was little support for the view that Britain was relatively badly-governed compared to other European countries, with just 11% agreeing, reflecting some residual national pride in the Westminster system of government. At the time of election of the Thatcher government in 1979, however, there was substantial support (52%) for the view that "the system should be changed to give ordinary people much more say in what goes on", contrasted with little backing (just 17%) for the idea that "the country's political leaders should have much more power". This again reveals a groundswell of popular support for our first construct of political alienation, with the prevailing belief that ordinary people have little influence over how government is run. Together, this focus in the surveying of popular attitudes on the design and functioning of the democratic system hints at increasing recognition of *disconnect*, new or not, between citizens and the political system.

4. The Rise of Distrust (1983-)

Following this period of increasing reflection on whether the political system was fit for purpose, the 1980s marked an era where trust – or rather distrust – in politicians, the state and agents of government (e.g. the police, civil servants) increasingly came under question. This both reflects the ongoing ideological battle over performance and reshaping of the state, and the intense divisions and distrust in society that were exacerbated by the radicalism of the Thatcher government in its programme of reforms. Indeed, Thatcher herself talked about "the enemy within" in relation to her political opponents. Around the same time, both the British Social Attitudes Survey (founded in 1983) and the pollsters MORI (now Ipsos-MORI) started to ask people whether government, and other institutions and groups of political actors, could be *trusted*. The evidence from the British Social Attitudes survey, plotted in Figure 4, reveals a steady erosion of trust in government over the few decades.

Fig 4. Trust in Government, British Social Attitudes Survey, 1986-2014
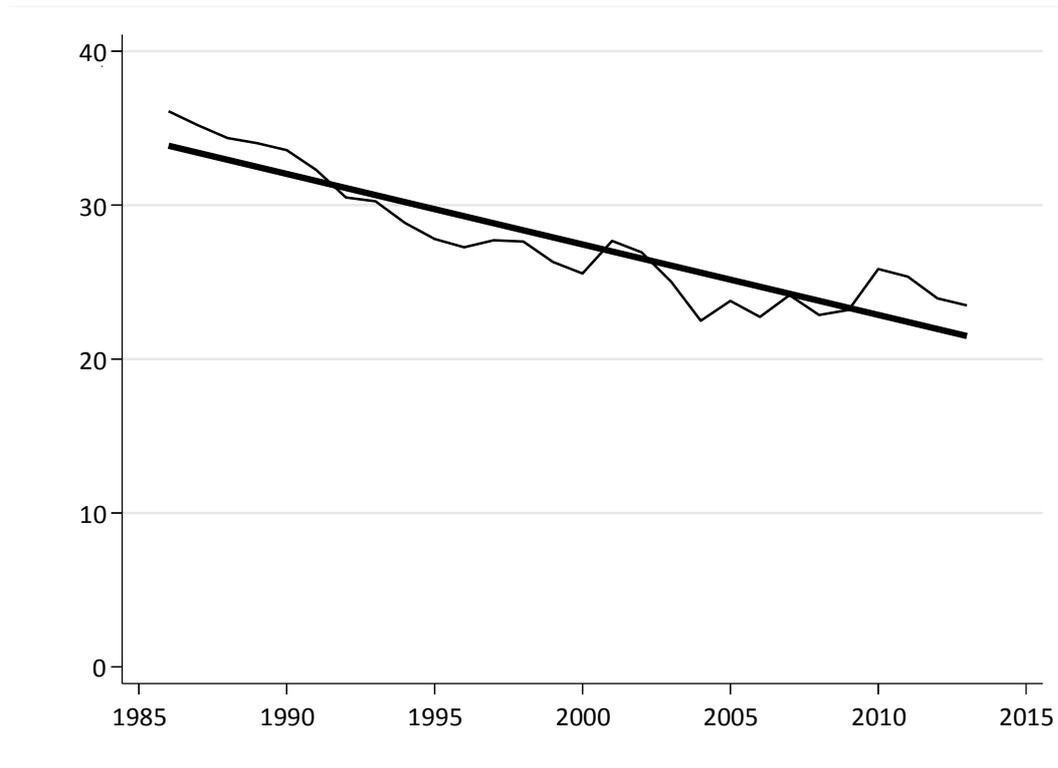
The evidence from the Ipsos-MORI 'veracity index' provides a rather different story about trends in political trust since the 1980s. Their question asks: "Now I will read out a list of different types of people. For each, would you tell me whether you generally trust them to tell the truth or not?" including government and politicians generally among the range of groups included in the measure. The data here, plotted in Figure 4, shows a slight rise in distrust through the 1980s and early 1990s, but a sudden fall around the time of election of the Blair government. After the honeymoon of New Labour, distrust starts to rise again, peaking in 2008 and 2009 around the time of the MP's expenses scandal and the global financial crisis. There is substantial parallelism in trends of distrust in politicians and government, though it is interesting that whereas in the late 1980s and 1990s citizens were slightly more distrusting of government but by the late 1990s had become more distrustful about politicians *generally*, perhaps reflecting the second form of alienation, as the practices and conduct of the political class come under question.

**Fig 5.** Distrust in Politicians and Government, Ipsos-MORI, 1983-2014
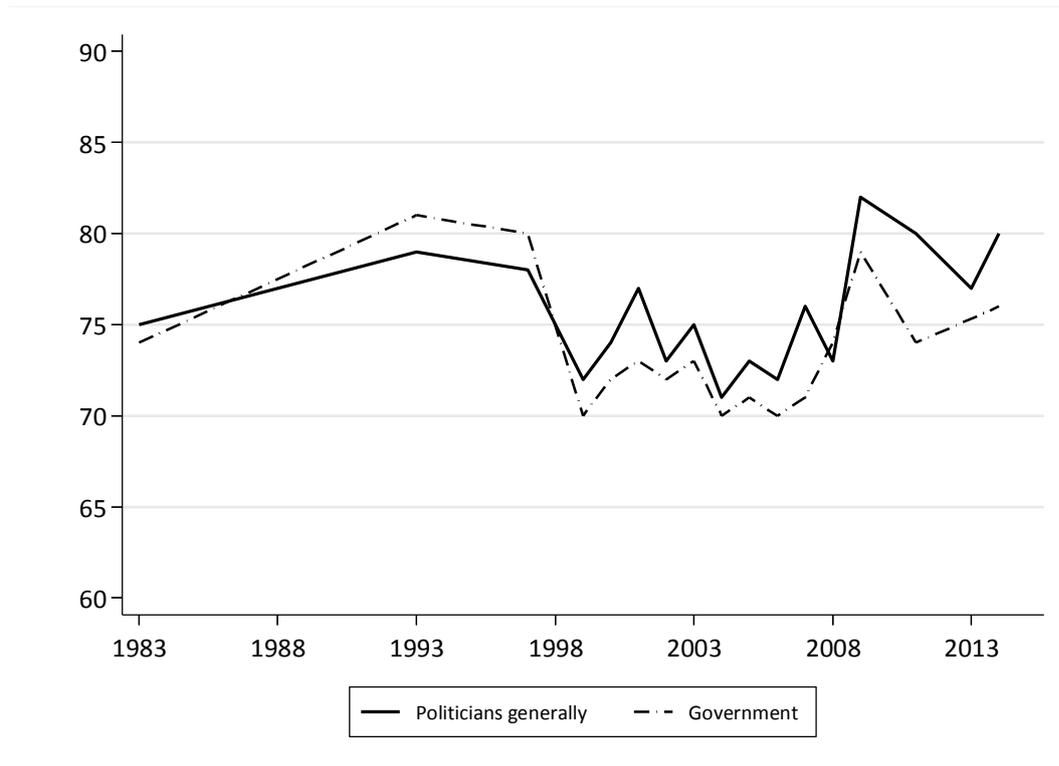
Beyond measuring these long-term trends, while continuing to ask questions about how well the political system worked, survey researchers and pollsters increasingly sought to discern popular attitudes on the practice and conduct of political institutions and groups. In the 1987 British Election Study, for example, it was asked "How much do you trust British police not to bend the rules in trying to get a conviction?" (35% said "only some of the time" or "almost never") and "how much do you trust top civil servants to stand firm against a minister who wants to provide false information to parliament?" (here 47% said "only some of the time" or "almost never"). These again reflected enquiry driven by a sense of public scepticism about the conduct of officeholders. Alongside this, a substantial portion 48%) of people expressed sympathy with the suggestion that "people like me have no say in what the government does" suggesting that our first and second forms of alienation were underlying conditions of public opinion in the 1980s.

5. Standards in Public Life (1992-)

The 1990s saw a string of scandals relating to the conduct of public officeholders – most prominently in the 'cash-for-questions' affair and Arms-to-Iraq controversy, and perjury conviction of former minister Jonathan Aitken. Additionally, the 'back to basics' campaign of the Prime Minister John Major had backfired leading to a string of embarrassing resignations affecting the government, culminating in the establishment of the *Committee on Standards in Public Life*. This again led to a focus in polling and survey research upon the second form of political alienation, assessing popular opinion regarding the behaviours and practices of the officeholders. For example, in 1998 Gallup started asking a question (lagging the sea-change that had taken place in public opinion earlier in the 1990s), since replicated by YouGov and the British Election Study Continuous Monitoring Survey "Do you think that the government has, on balance, been honest and trustworthy or not?" This again demonstrates the declining level of political trust, gaining brief relief with election of a new government in 2010.

Fig 6. Government honest and trustworthy (Gallup, YouGov, CMS), 1998-2013
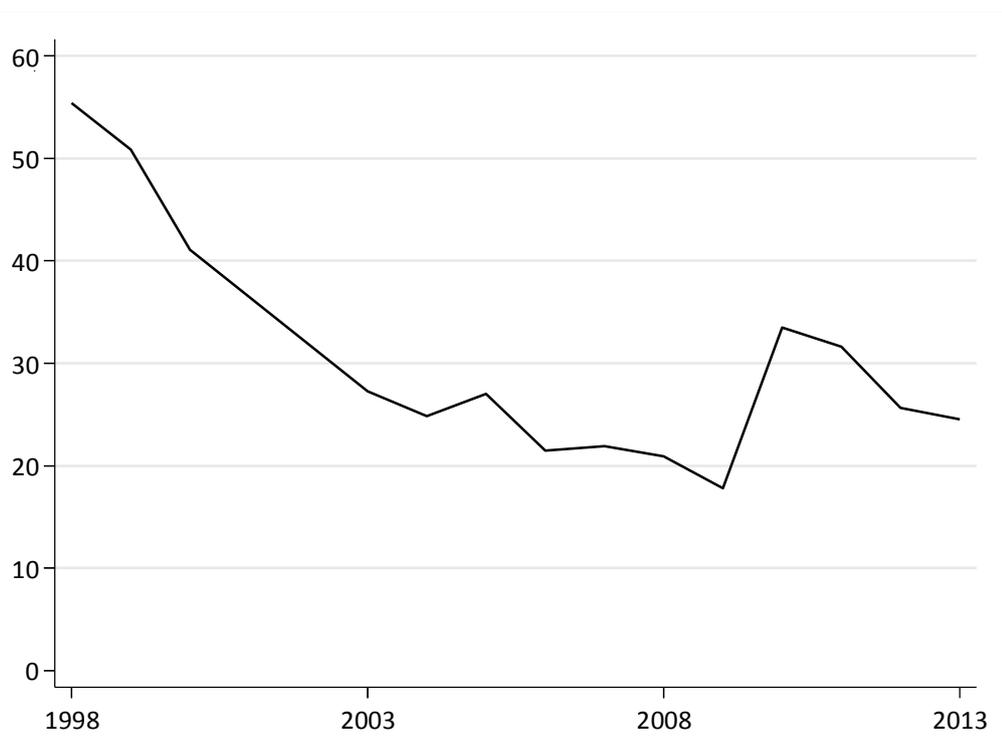
The backfiring back-to-basics campaign and the assortment of subsequent scandals under the Major, Blair, Brown and Cameron governments fuelled a drip-drip accumulation of public cynicism and distrust. In the 1997 British Election Study a remarkable 85% of people either agreed or strongly agreed that "The moral standards of British politicians have declined in recent years". Despite sense of widespread anomie in the conduct of British politicians and government, citizens still predominantly believed that "political parties are necessary to make our political system work" (75% saying they were necessary, measured on a five-point scale). At the same time, there was substantial agreement (45%) with the suggestion that "Members of Parliament don't know much about what ordinary people think". There is a persistent gap, then, between support for the principles and institutional foundations of liberal democracy, and pervasive discontentment observed in how citizens perceive the disconnect, motivations and behaviours of politicians and government.

6.   Valence, Public Services and Institutions (2001-)

Finally, from the early 2000s the rise of the 'valence' model of British politics (Clarke et al. 2004; 2009), and growing emphasis on *delivery* in public services, marks the final stage of our six phases of survey measurement of popular understandings of politics. This observed an ever-increasing stress on the governing capacity of parties and leaders, combined with increasing questions about respect/trust in institutions (ranging from Westminster to devolved governments to the European Union to the BBC). For example, between 2001 and 2014, polling firms and the Continuous Monitoring Survey asked more than 1,000 survey questions regarding handling of particular policy domains (Green and Jennings 2012; n.d.). Over this period, 'costs of governing' were in evidence, as public evaluations of the competence ruling Labour Party slid the longer they were in government (see Green and Jennings n.d.). Added to this, the 2009 expenses scandal prompted both a serious deterioration in public perceptions of the conduct of politicians, and a wide array of polling about beliefs regarding the practice

of politics (at a volume that is too abundant to properly review here). Allen and Birch (2015) show that in the wake of the scandal there is widespread scepticism about the behaviour of politicians and prevailing opinion that misconduct in public life is a serious problem. There is little doubt from this, and the evidence presented above, that the layers of evidence offered by successive generations of survey research and polling show an inexorable decline in political alienation: both in terms of specific support for institutions and leaders, in attitudes regarding performance and governability of the political system, the disconnect between voters and the political class, the rise of distrust and growing perceptions of the lack of integrity and ethics in the practice of politics.

Popular Understandings of Politics in Mass Observation Directives

The obvious limit of survey data on popular understandings of politics, as we noted earlier, is its reliance on contemporary perceptions and constructions of politics, as to what is important and the norms underpinning the political system. To supplement our analysis, we offer a brief comparison of qualitative data drawn from the Mass Observation Archive. Mass Observation was a social research organisation established in 1937 to record the everyday lives of ordinary people in Britain. Until 1965, it collected material by two general means: a team of 'mass observers' who recorded observations, overheards, survey responses, interview responses, and ephemera between 1937 and 1960; and a panel of volunteer writers, between 400 and 1,000 strong depending on the year, who kept monthly diaries (1939-65), completed day surveys (1937-38), and replied to quarterly open-ended questions or 'directives' (1939-55). In 1970, the Mass Observation Archive was established at the University of Sussex. In 1981, the Archive founded the Mass Observation Project, reviving the panel of volunteer writers. At the time of writing, directives are still being mailed three times a year to around 500 respondents.

In contrast to representative samples offered by national surveys, Mass-Observation data have been criticised for the social constitution of the panel (e.g. Busby 2000), which during the early period was skewed towards young men and women, socially located in the lower middle-class, and geographically located in Southern England; and which during the later period has been skewed towards white, middle-class, middle-aged and elderly women living in Central and Southern England. We argue that such concerns are not problematic for our purposes for several reasons. Firstly, while the panel has always been somewhat skewed in its composition, this criticism can be over-done (Bloome et al. 1993). Further, following Salter (2010) our approach is to sample within the panel to ensure consideration of a range of responses by age, gender, occupation and region. Finally, like Nettleton and Uprichard (2011), we analyse the MO material not for what panellists *think* – regardless of their demographic profile, these panellists constitute a rather strange group of people who volunteer their time to write for a social history organisation – but for the cultural repertoires they share with each other and presumably, plausibly, with other citizens too.

For this analysis we focus on shared cultural resources found in the responses of panellists to the directives from spring 1945 and summer 1950 and contrast these with our reissued directives from the summer of 2014. Details of the directives are provided in Table 2. We sampled 60 responses for each directive and read them for shared stories and prototypical entities regarding politicians, parties, elections, governments, and democracy. Sampling was purposive and stratified by gender, age, occupation, and region – to generate the broadest range of possible responses. Taken together, the samples provided over 300 sheets of typed, single-spaced text and were more than adequate in size to facilitate descriptive saturation.

Table 2. Mass-Observation Directives, 1945, 1950 and 2014

Mass Observation Archive code	Date of directive	Relevant question/task	Total number of responses
SxMOA1/3/81	Feb/Mar 1945	5) What would you say is your normal conversational attitude when talk gets round to each of the following groups of people: a) clergymen; b) politicians; c) doctors; d) advertising agents; e) lawyers; f) scientists; g) the rich; h) the poor.	161
SxMOA1/3/113	Jul 1950	4) How do you feel about: a) Atlee; b) Churchill; c) Bevin; d) Cripps?	369
Special Directive	2014	2) Consider the following people: a) Politicians; b) Doctors; c) Lawyers; d) Scientists. Do you associate any characteristics with each group? If you were in conversation with somebody and these kinds of people were referred to, what would be your attitude be?	
Special Directive	2014	3) How do you feel about: a) David Cameron; b) Ed Miliband; c) Nick Clegg; d) William Hague; e) George Osborne? Please feel free to share any other comments about any other politicians.	

For the purpose of this analysis, we focus briefly on some emerging themes from the 2014 special directive, and contrast them with responses to the original set of responses to the 1945 and 1950 directives. We explore the post-war repertoires in much more detail elsewhere (see Clarke et al. 2015).

Panellists were asked about their "normal conversational attitude when talk gets round to" politicians and various other groups of people (doctors, lawyers, and scientists). In 1945, three stories about politicians appeared in many of the responses: that they were not straight-talking, they were self-seeking, or they were good people compromised by party discipline. The responses from 2014 show a great deal of continuity, with a common theme among the respondents being that politicians are not straight-talking and self-serving; they are 'liars', 'untrustworthy', 'deceptive', 'smarmy', 'two-faced', 'dishonest', 'out for themselves', and even 'corrupt' and 'not adverse to giving backhanders to their mates'. They are 'incompetent'

and 'highly educated but rarely use this for the benefit of anyone other than themselves'.

They 'say what they think you want to hear, but do what they want anyway.' Along these

sorts of lines, one panellist notes:

> 'Considering Politicians: Hmm. Not really a trustworthy bunch, I dont think its possible to trust someone who is essentially always trying to convince you that they know best. With every politician and every political party, I think they are always trying to convert everyone to their way of thinking, so unless you agree exactly with all their policies, then I think your at a bit of a loss when it comes to voting.' (E5296, F, 33, Dunblane, Poditarist.)

> 'While some individual politicians are probably well-intentioned people, as a group they disgust me and I'd trust them about as far as I could throw them.' (S5202, M, 25, Leeds, Student)

Panellists also continue to give philosophical answers to this question in 2014; some suggest

that they do not share 'the widespread cynicism of politicians' motives', some acknowledge

the 'long and hard hours' or the 'dull and difficult nature of being a politician', while others

suggest that 'there is a difference between local and national politicians'.

Yet it seems that there is also a prominent story about politicians being 'out of touch'

with 'ordinary people' in 2014, which is not present in the 1945 material. Politicians are

described as 'privileged public school boys', 'fat cats in suits', 'pompous' and 'closeted from

the real world'. One respondent bemoans 'the staggering uniformity of most politicians'

backgrounds', while another writes that politicians are 'untrustworthy' because they 'have no

concept of living on a normal wage'. These repertoires reveal pervasive cynicism and the

degree of the disconnect felt between politicians and ordinary people.

> 'Politicians are in general untrustworthy careerists, with little knowledge of the real world. In the past the Tory candidate used be the local lord of the Manor or Mill Owner fighting for the well-being of his 'people'. The Labour candidate an ex-miner, ex-docker etc., fighting for his members. Now the politicians leave school, go to Uni get a degree in politics, then decide which party suits their personal career desires. Never goes into the real World.'
> (R3422, M, 66, Retired Banker, Brentwood.)

> 'Politicians: Untrustworthy. Say what they think you want to hear, but do what they want anyway whether or not it's what they said they would do. Live in a world out of touch with the rest of the population's daily experiences. Have no concept of living on a normal wage.

> David Cameron, Ed Miliband, Nick Clegg, William Hague and George Osborne are all career politicians. They have never had a regular paid job in commerce or industry and have no comprehension of how we mere mortals live. This doesn't equip them very well to do the job

they are doing. The politicians of the past usually had regular jobs before going into politics, or indeed as well as working in politics. Nigel Farage is one who has had paid employment in commerce before entering politics which puts him in a better position to understand the populace than all of the aforementioned. People may not like what he says but he has the courage to say it all the same, unlike the aforementioned.'
W3163 , F, 57, St Gennys, Housewife

A recurring theme among panellists is distrust stemming from the expenses scandal, that politicians are out for personal gain. Others mention Iraq and the 'dodgy dossier' as a source of disbelief in the integrity of politicians and their ability to follow through on their promises.

> 'I personally don't vote myself. I used to vote but since the expenses I see little point because I feel that MP's are only in the job for their own personal gain. Yes it is important to vote but I feel that the public's opinion of MP's needs to change. If MP's were more trustworthy, accountable, respected and were better behaved then people may feel (like myself) more inclined to vote. The party that you vote for also rarely keep the promises that they make in their manifestos!' (T4409, F, 35, Sale, Local Government Officer)

> 'Until recently I'd have said that people will vote if they feel that the people they're voting for understand and even share their concerns and will follow through on their promises to do something about them. But since the expenses scandal and the huge blow to public trust resulting from the 'dodgy dossier' incident in the run-up to the Iraq invasion, people simply don't believe that politicians can deliver anything.' (M3190, M, 55, East Boldon, Civil Servant).

Another question from the 2014 special directive asks respondents how they feel about David Cameron, George Osborne, William Hague, Ed Miliband, Nick Clegg and 'to share any comments about any other politician', (a lot of respondents have also commented on Boris Johnson and Nigel Farage). The responses to this part of the directive are more varied than the 1950 responses to a similar question, which possibly makes it more difficult to clearly identify the attributes Mass Observers associate with the good politician. There is a greater focus on each politician's personality and appearance:

> David Cameron is characterised as a 'sleazeball', 'multimillionaire posh boy' and 'emotionally unknowable careerist'; he is also criticised for having 'chubby cheeks', or a 'shiny buffed up face'.

Ed Miliband is described as 'weird', 'feeble', 'too wet' and a 'dweeb' or a 'creep'; one respondent explains that 'he is wiry and gangly and doesn't exude honesty or truth', another compares him to a 'sixth form debating team captain promoted beyond his capabilities.'

George Osborne is 'pompous' and a 'smirking public school bully'; if he wasn't a politician 'he would probably be a small time banker swindling old ladies out of their life savings'.

Nick Clegg is a 'poodle', a 'bully's sidekick', he is 'very slippery' and 'reneges on promises and plans'.

Respondents complement politicians who they perceive to be 'decent', 'intelligent', 'sensible' and 'practical'. They admire politicians who are seen as 'credible', 'coherent' and 'possess leadership skills'. For mass observers in 2014, it seems that the good politician is a 'normal person' who is 'emotionally knowable' and possesses an 'understanding of how hard life can be for ordinary people'.

It thus seems that the main stories to emerge from the 2014 data are that politicians are still untrustworthy and self-serving. However, it also seems that the 'gas-bag' party politician of the 1940s may have evolved into the 'sleaze-ball' politician who has become detached from everyday life in 21st century Britain.

Conclusion: Qualitative and Qualitative Perspectives on Political Alienation in Britain

The evidence from the Mass Observation directives dovetails nicely with the extensive evidence available from three-quarters of a century of survey research. It is clear, and not surprising, that political alienation is on the rise in the form of 'specific support', to use the conceptual framework formulated by Easton (1965). But importantly alienation has another dimension: *alienation from the operation of the political system*. This stems from a

discontent with how politics works, and often on the conduct of politicians. Our analysis has predominantly identified trends in our first and second constructs of alienation: the first being the belief among citizens that government is not run in the interests of ordinary people, and the second reflecting the sense that politics is full on wrongdoers and self-seekers lacking in integrity and virtue. There is little in the way of evidence that popular understandings of politics as understood by survey researchers have paid much attention to the third construct of alienation, concerning the unpredictability of politics. Nor is there a clear evidence base for tracing how alienation stems from rejection of prevailing values and norms in the political mainstream. This is not to say these forms of political alienation do not exist and are not on the rise, but that the measurement of social attitudes has provided little systematic enquiry to entertain this hypothesis. Our comparison of survey data with qualitative data from the MO confirms that while there may never have been a 'golden age' of democratic politics in which politicians were loved and respected, the current state of popular views of politics have taken an increasingly negative and cynical turn. This is manifested both in the strength of opinion in mass surveys and the shared repertoires of stories and understandings put forward in mass observational data. While there is still much to be learned from the historical record based on both poll archives and the many mass observation directives that have not been considered, this is an important first step for taking the long view on political alienation in Britain.

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