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# ‘Popular Understandings of Politics in Britain, 1945-2015’

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**Popular understandings of politics in Britain, 1945-2014**

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**Abstract**

We compare citizen understandings and expectations of politics for two periods of contemporary British history: the so-called 'golden age' of democratic engagement immediately after the Second World War; and the so-called period of 'crisis' around the turn of the twenty-first century. These understandings and expectations are recovered from volunteer writing for the Mass Observation Archive based at the University of Sussex, Brighton. Because the work is 'in progress', the paper focuses in particular on responses and diaries from 1945. Here, we find evidence of a number of shared cultural resources by which people made sense of politics at that time. Stories circulated about politicians who were not straight-talking, politicians who were self-seeking, and party politics that amounted to unnecessary squabbling and mud-slinging. This was no golden age for democratic engagement. But another common narrative told of 'the good politician' who impressed in testing long speeches on the radio and testing political meetings characterised by audience participation. When considering explanations for contemporary anti-politics, these findings encourage a focus on changing norms of politics and changing rituals of encounter between citizens and politicians. Of the existing relevant theories, they encourage a focus on videomalaise and the modernisation of political campaigning.

## 1) The problem of democracy in twenty-first century Britain

Democracy always appears to be facing one problem or another. For Almond and Verba (1963), the problem of democracy was a problem of conducive political culture that no longer seemed to be inevitable after fascism and communism. For political scientists focused on the United States during the 1960s and 70s, the problem of democracy was a problem of alienation – political powerlessness, meaningless, normlessness, and isolation – that seemed to threaten the political system with paralysis, civil violence, and revolution (Finifter 1970, Miller 1974, Critin et al 1975). Or it was a problem of governability, brought on by social demands threatening to outstrip the capacity of states to respond (Crozier et al 1975; also see King 1975 on 'governmental overload' in the United Kingdom). As for political science of the last two decades, informed by analyses of the World Values Survey and the Eurobarometer surveys, the problem of democracy has been a problem of

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declining political support (e.g. Nye et al 1997, Norris 1999, Pharr and Putnam 2000, Dalton 2004, Norris 2011) – where political support has been conceptualised following Easton (1965) to include support for the national community and general regime principles (which has not really declined anywhere), support for regime performance and institutions (which has declined in many countries and is thought to be a major cause for concern), and support for current officeholders (which has declined in many countries but is not considered to be a real problem since protective liberal democracy is predicated on the notion that sometimes the rascals will need to be thrown out – Held 2006).

The contemporary issue facing democracies can be summed up as one where many citizens remain happy to embrace the ideals of democracy but substantial and increasing numbers of citizens find the politics that is practised in democracies to be disengaging and disillusioning. For some commentators, these challenges facing democracies are part of a process of democratisation whereby old, traditional, elite-directed politics – liberal democracy – is being replaced by new, post-industrial, post-modern, post-material, elite-challenging politics – a participatory and deliberative democracy made up of new social movements, transnational political networks, and internet activism (Inglehart 1997, Dalton 2000, Norris 2002, Bang 2005, Della Porta 2013). We have two reservations about this narrative of democratisation. First, there is little hard evidence to suggest that elite-challenging forms of politics are replacing elite-directed forms of politics. In his review of evidence for political participation in Britain, Whiteley (2012) found that whilst a majority of people vote, only significant minorities of people sign petitions or buy products for political reasons, and only small minorities of people wear campaign badges, work in voluntary organisations, donate money to political causes, take part in demonstrations, or take part in illegal protests. In addition, importantly, all these forms of political participation are in decline (with the exception of ethical consumption). Stoker et al (2011) found something complementary to this when analysing data from the European Social Survey. If protesting is defined as demonstrating, signing petitions, joining boycotts, and wearing badges or pins, then people across Europe are neither protesting very much nor protesting much more than in earlier periods. These data, when combined with data from the European Caught in the Act of Protest project (Saunders 2014), also show that protesters are less disaffected and more engaged with formal political institutions than non-protesters. In other words, elite-challenging politics may have arrived, but only as part of an expanded repertoire for the already politically engaged; not as a replacement for elite-directed politics that promises to address the problem of declining support for politicians, parties, parliaments, and governments.

Our second reservation is more theoretical in character. Democracies need a balanced mix of citizenship traits including allegiance, obedience, support, and conformism, alongside participation, representation, assertion of minority rights, and tolerance (Almond and Verba 1963, Dalton 2009). Even some of those scholars most sympathetic to new forms of politics acknowledge something close to this. For Dalton (2004), the interest articulation currently provided by interest groups is important, but so is the interest aggregation traditionally provided by parties – without which coherent public policy is impossible. A middle road is needed between deferential citizens and unresponsive governments on the one hand, and divided citizens and grid-locked governments on the other (Dalton 2009). For Barnett and Bridge (2014), the categories of conflictual theories of democracy are important – agonism, dissensus, contestation, disruption – but so are problems of coordination, institutional design, and justification of the common good. Solutions to these problems may require an experimental sensibility that moves democracy beyond the traditional mechanisms of representative democracy, but they also require an institutional imagination found lacking in much associated with radical democracy (ibid).

In this view, the problem of democracy in twenty-first century Britain is a problem of declining political support for regime performance and institutions, and a rising negativity towards formal politics. It is also a failure on the part of new and elite-challenging politics to replace old and elite-directed politics to any significant extent. It is a developing imbalance between democratic voice and the institutional means by which collective and binding decisions might be reached. And it is the need to recover but also reform such mechanisms as parties, parliaments, and governments. We seek to address this problem. In particular, we seek explanations for declining political support and rising negativity towards formal politics. And in these explanations, we seek guidance for how institutions of democracy might be recovered and reformed.

## 2) Researching popular understandings of politics

*Existing research*

There has been much discussion about what explains declining political support for regime performance and institutions. Table 1 provides a brief summary of the literature most relevant to the British case, organised into demand-side theories of how citizens might have changed over time, and supply-side theories of how politics and political coverage might have changed over time.

*Table 1: Common explanations for declining political support*

| Demand-side theories |
| --- |
| Partisan dealignment (Bell 1960, Dalton and Wattenberg 2000). People used to be aligned to classes and the parties associated with those classes. They voted for those parties affectively and habitually. But the social structure has changed, producing multiple cleavages and multiple social identities. People now vote less in general – because voting is now a complex choice – and more on the basis of short-term factors (e.g. issues or government performance). |
| Postmodernisation (Inglehart 1997, Dalton 2000, Bang 2005). People used to be deferent and elite-directed in their participation. Now, young and highly educated people have post-materialist values and engage in elite-challenging politics as critical citizens. |
| Consumerisation (Stoker 2006). People have become used to acting as consumers. They expect participation to be low-cost and to produce linear returns. Politics disappoints because it is necessarily high-cost, tough, and messy; because it involves negotiation and compromise between competing interests. |
| Supply-side theories |
| The collapse of government performance (Mulgan 1994). This has collapsed as the easier problems, costing the least, and benefiting the most people have been solved, leaving the harder problems, costing the most, and benefiting the least people. |
| The weak performance of two-party systems (Norris 1997). The Westminster model of responsible party government used to work well. But then the Labour Party positioned itself uncompetitively in ideological space during the 1970s and 80s, minor parties began to ebb and flow, and the two major parties lost support. Now, the Westminster model seems unfair to minor parties, many votes seem to be wasted, and governments elected with minority support face questions of legitimacy. |
| The modernisation of political campaigning (Neustadt 1997, Norris 1997, Hay 2007, Lawrence 2009, Denver et al 2012). With partisan dealignment, rational choice models of voter behaviour have become dominant and parties have invested in non-selective campaigning. This involves using opinion polls and focus groups to locate parties in the centre-ground, competing on valence issues and questions of performance, and communicating with citizens by televised, choreographed, stage-managed press conferences, photo-opportunities, and ticketed rallies. Citizens find this lack of difference and conflict difficult to identify with and to care about (Mouffe 2005). |
| Videomalaise (Hoggart 1957, Robinson 1976, Cappella and Hall Jamieson 1997, Kepplinger 2000, Valentino et al 2001). People encounter politics through media frames. The strategic frame has come to replace the issue frame. Viewing politics through this frame, people come to withdraw political support. |
| Depoliticisation (Burnham 2001, Crouch 2004, Marquand 2004, Hay 2007). The New Right Project of the last three decades – neoliberalism – has attacked the public domain in the name of free markets and market discipline. Following public choice theory, politicians and civil servants have been positioned as self-interested rent-seekers. Deregulation, privatisation, and audit have removed power and responsibility from public actors. Why should people participate in politics when those involved are not to be trusted and no longer powerful? |
| Globalisation (Pauly 1997, Held et al 1999, Scharpf 2000, Crouch 2004). States must now share power with supra-state authorities. They are constrained in their actions by international regulatory regimes. They must bend to the will of global firms. They are less sovereign and autonomous than they were. They are less able to provide for and protect their citizens than they were. Meanwhile, citizens have developed transnational affiliations, participate in transnational networks, and look elsewhere to claim rights. |

*New research: Insights from Mass Observation*

The present paper is a working paper from a research project seeking to supplement existing research in this field; research that has tended to rely on survey data from national election studies, Eurobarometer surveys, and the World Values Surveys. If there was a golden age for British democracy, it was probably the period immediately after the Second World War. Turnout at general elections was relatively high, reaching an adjusted figure of 90% in 1951 (Denver et al 2012). Support for the two main political parties was relatively high, reaching 97% in 1951. Satisfaction with government was relatively high, reaching a net figure of 9.9 for the 1951-55 government – still the highest for any government since the Second World War (ibid). But none of the commonly used surveys in this field go back so far as the immediate post-war period and enable a historical comparison between that apparent golden age of British democracy and the apparent period of crisis in which we currently find ourselves – a period when adjusted turnout at general elections reached as low as 62% in 2001, support for the two main political parties reached as low as 67% in 2010, and satisfaction reached a net figure of -62.9 for the 1992-97 government (ibid).

We see a need for more historical comparisons between so-called 'golden ages' for democratic engagement and corresponding periods of 'crisis'. In addition, we see a need for studies that listen to the voices of citizens at these times. In the majority of previous academic studies, citizens have been asked closed questions about how much they support regime performance and institutions. Correlations have then been tested between these dependent variables and numerous independent variables: membership of parties; education levels; membership of civil society organisations; national economic performance; habits of media use; and so on. In all this, citizens have been given little opportunity to express in their own terms what they define as politics, how they relate to politics, and what they value in politics. We need to know if and how popular understandings of politics have changed over time. A small body of work has been completed in recent years using focus groups and interviews to establish relevant popular understandings at the turn of the twenty-first century (see Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002, O'Toole et al 2003, and Van Wessel 2010). But there has been no means of comparing these views to perspectives from previous periods.

The project behind the present paper studies the UK and seeks to address these supplementary needs through two pieces of work. One piece gathers findings from survey research dating back at least as far as the Second World War. The focus is on opinion polling and especially Gallup International Public Opinion Polls dating back to 1937. The rest of this paper draws on the second piece of work. This gathers citizen voices from the Mass Observation Archive based at the

University of Sussex and analyses them to establish popular understandings of politics in Britain for the immediate post-war period and the current period.

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 1000 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 approximately 500 respondents.

Mass-Observation data have been used by many academics from many disciplines who value their richness, frankness, and historical depth (e.g. Nettleton and Uprichard 2011, Salter 2010, Savage 2010, Smart et al 2012). In the past, concerns have been raised about material collected by inexperienced, amateur, untrained mass observers (MacClancy 1995). Our project does not use this material but goes straight to the responses of panel members – the most unmediated layer of the archive (Sheridan 1994). Concerns have also been raised about 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. Our project addresses this latter concern in three ways. First, while the panel has always been skewed a little, we argue with Bloome et al (1993) that too much can be made of this. Currently, for example, the panel has roughly equal proportions of young, middle-aged, and elderly members, roughly equal proportions of members from the different regions of the UK, and only a slight bias towards women (58%). Second, following the example of Salter (2010), we sample within the panel to ensure consideration of a range of responses by age, gender, occupation, and region (see below). Third and most importantly, like Nettleton and Uprichard (2011), we analyse the material not for what panellists think or do – because regardless of age, gender, occupation, and region, 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.

*The focus of our study*

Mass Observation directives exist for two periods: 1939 to 1955 (which happens to correspond to Britain's so-called golden age of mass democratic engagement); and 1981 to the present (which happens to correspond to the so-called period of crisis). Across those two periods, respondents were asked to write about formal politics on nine separate occasions covering the years 1945, 1950, 1996, 1997, 2010, and 2014. In the following section, we focus on shared cultural resources found in the responses of panellists to the first two of these directives: spring and summer 1945. Ideally, these would be supplemented by findings from responses to the other 1945 and 1950 directives, before being compared to material from the more recent period. But space is limited and the project is work in progress. Details of the two 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 two samples provided almost 300 sheets of typed, single-spaced text and were more than adequate in size to facilitate descriptive saturation.

*Table 2: Mass-Observation directives, spring and summer 1945*

| Mass Observation Archive code | Date of directive | Relevant question/task | Total number of responses |
|---|---|---|---|
| SxMOA1/3/81 | Feb/Mar 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? | 161 |
| SxMOA1/3/83 | May/Jun 1945 | Please report at intervals on the election campaign in your constituency and people's feelings about it. What are your views about having an election in July? What is your present attitude to: the Conservative Party; the Labour Party; the Liberal Party; the Communist Party; the Commonwealth Party? What would you say are the chief points in the Liberal Party policy, and how would you say their policy differed from the Labour and Conservative Party policies respectively? | 98 |

**3) Looking back: Popular understandings of politics in mid-twentieth-century Britain**

In early 1945, panellists were asked about their "normal conversational attitude when talk gets round to" politicians and various other groups of people (clergymen, doctors, advertising agents, lawyers, and scientists). Three stories about politicians appear in many of the responses. In the first, politicians are not straight-talking. They are "clever and crafty" (respondent no. 2744) or "clever rogues" (3418 – see Appendix A for profiles of each respondent). They are "seriously dressed and

smart in talk, not to be trusted, well-educated" (3650). They break promises, treating politics as a game. For respondent 2886, "All [are] playing a game and all will promise the moon. All play on the emotions and passions of the uneducated". For respondent 3137, "politics is a dirty game and largely talk anyway. General conception? Much the same as mine". In this narrative, two main characters or prototypes clearly stand out: the gas-bag; and the gift-of-the-gabber. They even appear in responses where panellists try hard to be even-handed (or so it would seem). Respondent 1075 notes that "not all [are] self-seekers and gas-bags", before emphasising that "critics" view politicians as "out to feather their own nests [and] gas-bags". Respondent 1016 notes that "we've got some grand men" but also that "some gift-o-the-gabbers too". For respondent 1165, "though many are sincere, many are not […]. Many seem merely to have the gift of the gab". Respondent 3371 tells how politicians "are usually men whose principal gift is that 'of the gab'", before adding that "most people are inclined to think of politicians as a whole in a derogatory sense ('a lot of talkers'), forgetting that we ordinary people have chosen them to represent our interests".

If the first shared narrative is that politicians are not straight-talking – they are gas-bags and gift-of-the-gabbers – the second is that politicians are self-seeking. They are "place-seekers" (1079). They are "not sincere in their professed beliefs but enter politics partly because they don't want to work and haven't the knowledge for a profession, and mainly because they desire power" (1478). He is "bent first and foremost on making a career for himself out of politics" (1534 – and most politicians at the time were men). They are "twisters, dishonest, and self-serving" (1682). They are "a set of self-seeking crooks" (2475), "out to make a career" (3120), and, again, "self-seeking" (3230). Even when panellists take a different view – or maybe want to be seen by Mass Observation as taking a different view (as being more sophisticated than your average citizen) – they still feel the need to defend politicians against presumably widely shared characterisations of the self-seeker, the place-seeker, the self-server, and the careerist. Respondent 2490 writes: "I am interested in politicians and often irritated by the conception of them as opportunists and self-seekers, but I should say that is rather the general opinion locally". Respondent 2684 writes: "In conversation, I generally find that people consider politicians as motivated by ulterior and personal motives of self-advancement, either in pocket or personal ambition. But I don't believe it". Here, respondents interact with a story that was circulating in 1945 – the notion that politicians are self-seeking. Even though some panellists reject or lament the story and its associated prototypes, by doing so they confirm its pervasiveness and perceived power at the time.

A third story found in responses to the Spring 1945 directive tells of politicians who may be good people but are compromised by party discipline. "About half of them go in with the earnest

desire to do something. The party is too strong so what happens is they just become good boys and only speak when allowed" (2254). Or, for respondent 2466:

> In the case of a conversation about politicians, I should think of them as being the puppets that act according to the manipulation of the leaders of the various parties. I should express the opinion that whatever their private opinion might be, or what they consider would be the will of their constituents, they must vote as the party decrees or waste their vote.

The main characters in this story, alongside the 'good boys' and 'puppets' of the preceding quotations, are 'the partyman' and his other: 'the independent' or 'the statesman'. Respondent 3371 associates politicians with "partymen", described as people "who always have their own political axe to grind" and who "can say nothing good of their opponents". For this respondent, "party politics warps the judgement of clever men". Respondent 1095 would agree: "For an imaginative and thoughtful man (or woman), it must be misery to belong to a party. Independents […] are much to be envied, but no ordinary politician would stand any chance of a constituency". A final quotation from responses to this directive captures the integration of this line about party politics with previous lines about insincere and self-serving politicians: "They almost have to be dishonest, squeezing themselves into some party formula and not really caring about their constituents but merely seeking advancement. When a politician becomes a statesman with a broad vision […] then one respects him" (1213).

What should we make of these stories and characters? We should see them as windows onto popular understandings of the time, for it is highly unlikely that mass-observers invented these categories and prototypes independently of interaction with family, friends, work colleagues, radio programmes, newspapers, and so on. And we should see them as windows onto a prevailing negativity towards politicians and parties during a period of British history that is often portrayed as a golden age for democratic engagement – an age of consensus, national purpose, and social reconciliation built from war-time experiences of conscription, evacuation, rationing, and communal air-raid shelters (Addison 1975, Calder 1969, Hennessy 1992); and an age of radicalism built on the back of war-time experiences fighting alongside the Soviet Union against fascism (Miliband 1961). We return to the question of golden ages below, but first we turn to the second Mass-Observation directive of 1945.

In the summer of that year, panellists were asked to report on the 1945 General-Election campaign, people's feelings about it, their own views, their attitudes towards the five main political

parties, and their understandings of policies and policy differences between the parties. While some panellists followed the directive carefully, reporting on each item in turn, many apparently used the directive as an opportunity to write freely about politicians, parties, and elections. One story, repeated across many of the responses, associates party politics with mud-slinging, positions it unfavourably against coalition politics, and positions party politicians unfavourably against independents. People are tired of "politicians hurling abuse at one another" (1346), "of all the accusations and counter-accusations" (1056), "of the mud-slinging and argument" (2384). Respondent 1165 is "sure this mud-slinging is not liked and gives people a bad view of politics". Respondent 3388 "hate[s] party mud-slinging", is "normally non-party", "prefer[s] an independent", and "will stand for a coalition". This respondent is not alone in focusing on "independent members" (3655) or "individual candidates" (1346) who, "irrespective of party" are "good men" who would be "good for the country and for Parliament" (1980). Nor are they alone in supporting coalition politics – something introduced in Britain during a war that is not quite over by summer 1945. "Many people seemed to think that is was a pity that the coalition government did not continue", writes panellist 3426. Respondent 3121 agrees: "National government is hoped for by many; frequently is asked 'why need there be parties?'". One of these many is panellist 3634 who "wish[ed] that until the Japanese war is over the National Government could have continued under Mr Churchill". Another is respondent 3402: "[…] the coalition should have continued until the end of the Japanese War. International affairs are in a state too precarious to allow for us lowering our prestige and lessening our stability by petty squabbles at home".

So one story told about the General Election in 1945 – by Mass-Observation panellists but drawing on shared cultural resources circulating in the broader society across which they were spread – is that politics involves mud-slinging and petty squabbling, which some individuals manage to rise above (especially 'the independent' and 'the good man'). This connects to a second story found in the election diaries: some politicians deserve respect for the qualities demonstrated in their speeches and performances at public meetings. These politicians are "good speakers" (1056, 1980) or "excellent speaker[s]" (1346, 3426). They have "pleasant voice[s]" (1980, 3426). Moreover, they demonstrate heart, fight, and conviction in their speeches. For respondent 1980, one politician giving a speech on the radio "spoke as if his heart was in what he said". Another politician gave a "fighting speech". A third spoke "with sincerity and conviction". Sincerity is a virtue demonstrated by 'good speakers', alongside authenticity, personality, and ability. "[…] a straightforward, unpretentious speech" portrays the politician as "an unpretentious sort of man" (3351). "[…] a good case" shows the politician to be "very able" (3310). As a result, citizens can be impressed by

individual politicians, if not by party politics as a whole. Listen to respondent 3351: "Went to Hull for tea and with Dad to Stafford Cripps meeting. Mackay, candidate for N W Hull, also spoke. Was favourably impressed by Mackay. Dad still doubtful. We were both greatly impressed by Cripps". Or panellist 3351: "Labour meeting. I impressed with sincerity of first 2 speakers". Or respondent 2675: "As regards personality, I feel that Dr Taylor is by far the best of the three candidates. At the only political meeting I attended, he impressed me very much by his obvious sincerity and high standard of values".

If some politicians are found to be impressive, it is partly because citizens tend to hear them, and sometimes see them, in testing circumstances. Speeches on the radio at this time were often 30 minutes or more in length. This provided enough rope for politicians to hang themselves. Respondent 1165 reports: "My wife felt that half an hour is too long or, anyway, very few speeches were good enough to last that length of time". Long speeches exposed politicians lacking in character or with nothing to say. Panellist 3648 notes:

> Sinclair is speaking on the liberal policy as I write. His delivery is vile and irritating, with too much emphasis, mostly in the wrong places. Nothing but platitudes and nothing to offer. Earnest Brown was another washout. Nothing to say and neither personal charm nor sincerity […]. Sinclair still speaking. Small men cannot get over on the air. Neither can insincere men. The voice cannot be disguised in a long talk and character comes out.

This panellist expects delivery, charm, sincerity, and character from politicians. Long radio speeches allow some of them to demonstrate such things. Of course, they also catch out politicians lacking such capacities. And public meetings were probably more demanding still in this respect. They could be rowdy, late-night affairs. Respondent 1974 attended one hosted at their local theatre. "We got there after 10 o'clock so we had to go to the gallery. Plenty of room there and it was red hot". The audience "jeered". Some drunks "got nasty", but there was "no violence" – a reference suggesting that violence was a real possibility. The local candidate began his speech. Hecklers interjected. The audience laughed, booed, asked questions, and shouted "'answer the gallery!'". "By 11 o'clock we were tired of it and came home. I may find out what happened after we left" – because the meeting continued past 11pm. In these circumstances, many politicians would be tested to destruction. They would demonstrate a "bad platform manner, being nervous and a bad answerer of questions" (1093). They would be exposed as "poor speaker[s]" with no policy and unable to answer questions (2794). Or they would be "too clever, too oily! Too sweetly reasonable", revealing

themselves to be opportunist and careerist (3207). But it was possible for some to pass the test and, in doing so, to impress their audiences. These politicians are "good debating speaker[s]" (2794). They answer questions "fairly satisfactorily" and "hold the crowd's attention" (2384). They earn respect from those reluctant to give it. One reluctantly impressed citizen is panellist 2384:

> Conservative candidate, ex-MP, prosperous-looking businessman, addressed our boys and girls in the last half hour of the day on the football field. Typical Conservative speech full of half-truths and misleading statements. Received a fairly peaceful reception, though most of the soldiers and ATS are evidently Labour. Some heckling but nothing vicious. Questions answered fairly satisfactorily.

Respondent 3426 is another reluctantly impressed audience member:

> At 5.30pm I went in to the Town Hall and found Sir Bedford Dorman in the chair and just starting to speak. He made a babbling speech which I in the gallery found difficulty in hearing. […] By this time, the Labour and Commonwealth people poured in and began to heckle. The poor speaker was getting more and more hot and bothered when the candidate arrived amid mixed clapping and booing. I had been told that Sir Thomas Dugdale was not a good speaker, but really he did not do at all badly and was easily heard.

An overall assessment? "Even Dugdale opponents conceded he managed the meeting well and his prestige went up".

In summary, these election diaries alert us to a couple of stories about politics and politicians that were circulating in British society in the summer of 1945. One story was that party politics is unnecessary. Central characters in this story were the mud-slinging 'partyman' and the 'independent' or 'good man'. A second narrative was about individual politicians who impress by their good character; 'good speakers' who deal impressively with long radio speeches and rowdy meetings. Indeed, the election diaries are also helpful in alerting us to the common practices and events of political campaigning in 1945 – the rituals of encounter between citizens and politicians that may help to explain these prevalent stories and prototypes. Citizens listened to the speeches of politicians on the radio. "I've just heard Churchill's second broadcast" (1346). "I turned on to listen to Mr E Brown last evening" (1980). "Heard Anderson on the wireless last night" (2576). They discussed them with others. "At dinner time, my sister asked: 'Did you hear Ernest Brown last

night?'" (1048). "J greeted me at the bus stop with 'did you hear Churchill last night?'" (1346). "When D came into the office this morning, he asked what we thought of Sir John Anderson last night" (1346). Furthermore, they attended local political meetings involving speeches but also participation by audience members:

> My sister and I went to a Labour election meeting at the town hall to hear candidate and the chief speaker Hugh Dalton. The body of the hall was full and most of the balcony so there were more than 2000 people there. The audience was eager to listen and did so with occasional bursts of laughter or applause […]. The speeches dealt with general policy and explanation of such things as socialisation, 'private enterprise' controls, housing, and social services. There were four questions […]. A local woman councillor appealed for funds to help pay for the hire of the hall and charges which is rather big yet owing to the debt on the hall. She appealed for paper money first: stewards collected it […]. Then bowls were passed round for the silver. [1048].

> The Tory meeting was literally up-roarious. No slight, innuendo, misrepresentation, or sneering remark was allowed to go unchallenged […]. Another speaker announced as an industrialist was heckled about profits and cartels […]. Any reference to Churchill being indispensable was greeted with moans of dissent […]. The Tory candidate came in and there were some boos for him […]. My hands were sore with clapping and my face was still with laughter. [1048].

> Last evening I attended a meeting at the town hall […]. There were quite lively questions asked. At one time it got hot and a young man started to attack another, and to be called to order by the chairman […]. I asked if the Labour party were in favour of sex equality and, if so, how was it that there were four men on the platform and no women. There was great laughter and loud applause. The candidate said his wife would have been there but she was busy heckling Lord Winterton […]. One local man kept the candidate arguing about the question: was Mulberry produced by government or private enterprise? He said private enterprise. (I heard today that probably he had had a drop and that made him talkative). [1980].

People attend these meetings to listen – to hear explanations of problems and policies. But they do so actively, applauding or booing the speakers, and asking questions. They participate in other ways too, like contributing to campaign funds. These meetings can generate laughter and entertainment. They can be rowdy with speakers challenged by hecklers. And they seem to be well-attended. We can expect the Mass-Observation panellists to be particularly active citizens. After all, they signed-up for Mass Observation and appear to have taken seriously their roles as volunteer writers. But we hear in their accounts of full halls, galleries, platforms, and lobbies; of "the girl conductor on the bus" who "was bewailing the fact that she had not been able to get to any election meetings owing to late duties" (1048); of "the local works" where "they gave the candidates 1 ½ hours of work's time to address the workpeople" (2751); and of numerous meetings in town halls, schools, Co-op halls, gardens, village halls, theatres, Ambulance halls, squares, market places, factories, and parks. Like the long and relatively unmediated speeches on the radio, with little associated framing by journalists, these meetings – involving a balance of reverent listening to speeches and irreverent audience participation – appear to have been common ways through which citizens and politicians encountered one another in 1945.

**4) Looking forward: Towards a comparative analysis**

Mass-Observation panellists are by no means typical citizens. They volunteer for a social history project. They use their biographical writing to construct middle-class identities (Savage 2010). But they did not create from nothing the stories and characters identified in the above section – either as individual panellists working independently of one another, or as a social group working independently of wider society. Rather, such narratives and prototypes both informed and reflected popular understandings of the time. So, focusing on these lines and categories, to begin this concluding section, we might ask: what were the popular understandings of politics in Britain immediately after the Second World War?

First, there was a surprising negativity towards politics – surprising given what is known about voter turnout and reported satisfaction with government during this period. Politics was thought to be unnecessary; to be 'mud-slinging' and 'petty squabbling'. Politicians were thought to be self-serving and not straight-talking; to be 'place-seekers', 'careerists', 'gas-bags', and 'gift-of-the gabbers'. As Fielding et al (1995) have also argued – focusing more widely on popular experiences of evacuation, the Blitz, the army, industrial relations, the 1945 General-Election campaign, and Labour's first majority government – this was no golden age for democratic engagement. Indeed, it resembles in some ways the 'stealth democracy' of late twentieth-century America described by

Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2002). In focus groups and surveys, they found a belief prevalent across America that all citizens have the same common goals – the 'common good' or 'silent majority' – and therefore that all debate, deliberation, deal-making, compromise etc. (i.e. politics) is unnecessary and generated by special-interest lobbying and self-serving decision-makers. For citizens listened to by Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, government could just be technical in character: management by neutral experts or business-people. So in contemporary America, politics is thought to be unnecessary, politicians are thought to be self-serving, and neutral experts or business-people are thought to be needed for government. As we have seen, in Britain around the middle of the last century, politics was thought to be unnecessary, politicians were thought to be self-serving, and those believed to be needed were independents, statesmen, coalitions, and national governments.

It is worth noting this historical continuity between the immediate post-war period and the current period (noting also that evidence for stealth democracy has been found recently in Britain – see Stoker and Hay 2012). But a simple focus on historical continuity fails to account for important changes in political engagement during the second half of the twentieth century. There was negativity in 1945, just as there is today. But still people turned out in relatively large numbers to vote. And still relatively large numbers of people reported satisfaction with government. So the question remains: what has changed? For Lawrence (2009), what explains participation during the immediate post-war period is not enthusiasm about politics but effective party organisation and selective campaigning. This explanation makes a certain amount of sense in the context of our data. But hopefully the comparative part of our study will add something to this. If anti-politics is endemic to democracy (Fielding 2008), then the key question is not whether it existed in the middle of the last century, but to what extent it existed relative to the current so-called 'crisis' period. This comparison will be one of the original contributions of the project from which the present paper draws. According to Fielding et al (1995), the period after the Second World War was no golden age for democratic engagement. But they make this judgement against a largely implicit set of normative standards, including that engaged citizens: would not put family or neighbourhood ahead of other social groups (p26); would be more interested in "challenging control" than "bread and butter issues" (p33); would have detailed knowledge of the Beveridge Report and an idea of "how structural reform might be organised" (p34); would be more interested in "the big issues of the day" than "relatively trivial personal problems" (p39); and would listen to party political broadcasts, attend political meetings, read election leaflets, and know the names of all candidates standing in their locality (p193). We agree with Hinton (1997) that such normative standards, whether implicit or not, are both remarkably demanding – who would not put their family and neighbours first when arranging

shelter from the Blitz? – and remarkably simplistic in the way they separate out "challenging control" and "the big issues of the day" from "bread and butter issues" and "personal problems" – as if the personal and the political are not connected. What is needed more than implicit normative standards, we argue, is empirical material from another period against which to compare data from the 1940s and 50s. Maybe this was not a golden period for democratic engagement in that negativity towards formal politics was certainly present. But maybe it was something of a golden period still when compared to changing levels of negativity since that time? Indeed, maybe there is a point when levels of negativity cross a threshold, with implications for democratic functioning?

In this connection, while a clear negativity towards formal politics is found in the data from 1945, also found is a clear image of 'the good politician' and, to a lesser extent, 'the good government'. These might be thought of as partners to Dalton's (2009) 'good citizen'. For Dalton, what it means to be a good citizen varies over time – for the public if not for political theorists. As society changes, so do norms of citizenship. The good citizen used to feel respect for political authority and a duty to participate by way of voting, paying taxes, belonging to political parties, and so on. Today, the good citizen increasingly demands and celebrates social rights, and participates by way of volunteering, protest, buying products for political reasons, and so on. Following Dalton, we might ask if what it means to be a good politician also varies over time? As society changes, do the norms of politics (for politicians) change? In 1945, the good politician was independent of party, a 'statesman', a 'good man', and a 'good speaker' able to demonstrate certain virtues: sincerity, authenticity, conviction, personality, and ability. It was not easy to achieve this figure in post-war Britain – a period of strong party politics. But it was possible, not least because of how citizens encountered politicians through long speeches on the radio and rowdy political meetings, where politicians could be tested and, in turn, could perform their ability and good character. As Lawrence (2009) argues, this kind of political interaction was common from at least the late eighteenth century in the UK. The nomination hustings were physical ordeals that 'tested the mettle' of politicians. When they were abolished in 1872, the ritual moved to election meetings. But gradually, between roughly the beginning of the 1920s and the end of the 1950s, the ritual changed too. Meetings became less boorish, masculine, and irreverent, and more sober, calm, and restrained – in a context of communism and fascism in Europe, and the expansion of the franchise at home. For Lawrence, by the 1950s, political interaction was becoming less entertaining and fun, while citizens were becoming more indifferent and apathetic. Following Lawrence, we might ask if what it means to be a good politician has changed over the last 70 years, or if the potential for politicians to demonstrate their goodness has just changed? Was 1945 just before the end of an era when politicians gave long

speeches, participated in rowdy public meetings, and, through these rituals, were able to demonstrate ability and good character? What are the corresponding rituals of the twenty-first century, and, whether norms for politics and politicians have changed or not, is it still possible for politicians to be 'the good politician'?

Looking forward, then, from the perspective of the present working paper, a number of tasks remain. Responses to the other seven Mass-Observation directives need analysing in the same careful, relatively inductive way that allows citizens to speak in their own words about how they define politics, how they relate to politics, and what they value in politics. Responses to the Mass-Observation directives need integrating with polling data from each period. And all datasets need reading comparatively as part of attempts to explain declining political support and rising negativity towards formal politics. Potential explanations are numerous, as indicated by Table 1. But findings from the 1945 directives already suggest a particular focus on videomalaise and the modernisation of political campaigning. If long speeches on the radio and political meetings characterised by active audiences were important rituals of encounter between citizens and politicians in the immediate post-war period, helping to explain how it was possible for some politicians to impress citizens by demonstrating ability and good character (despite a generalised negativity towards formal politics at the time), then what are the equivalent rituals today? For Lawrence (2009), they are the choreographed photo-opportunity and the managed press conference. The "spirit of the hustings" may survive in media interviews, radio phone-ins, and studio discussions, but these are compromised by broadcasters keen for soundbites and politicians keen to give them. There are large academic literatures on these topics (see Table 1). It will be interesting to see what can be added by our historical-comparative analysis.

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**Appendix A**

| Respondent | Age | Sex | Occupation | Region |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1016 | 58 | Female | Teacher | North East |
| 1048 | 48 | Female | Teacher | East of England |
| 1056 | 63 | Female | Teacher | South East |
| 1075 | 55 | Female | Film producer | London |
| 1079 | 54 | Female | Teacher | South West |
| 1093 | 34 | Male | Farm worker | West Midlands |
| 1095 | 69 | Male | Railway draughtsman | North West |
| 1165 | 39 | Male | Electrical engineer | South East |
| 1213 | 28 | Male | Armed forces/student | London |
| 1346 | 29 | Female | Technical assistant | South East |
| 1478 | 24 | Male | Student | North West |
| 1534 | 47 | Female | Writer/farmer/housewife | Scotland |
| 1682 | 25 | Male | Armed forces/clerk | Scotland |
| 1974 | 41 | Female | Teacher | North East |
| 1980 | 65 | Female | Nurse | South East |
| 2254 | 43 | Female | Housewife | West Midlands |
| 2384 | 30 | Male | Not known | North West |
| 2466 | 58 | Female | Nurse | South West |
| 2475 | 60 | Female | Lecturer | East of England |
| 2490 | 45 | Female | Housewife | Scotland |
| 2576 | 35 | Male | Manager of textile mill | East Midlands |
| 2675 | 53 | Female | Civil servant | London |
| 2684 | 37 | Male | Food packing manager | South East |
| 2744 | 40 | Male | School handyman | West Midlands |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 2751 | 43 | Male | Chemist | North West |
| 2794 | 24 | Male | Civil engineer | East Midlands |
| 2886 | 29 | Female | Shop assistant | Yorkshire and Humber |
| 3120 | 79 | Female | Teacher | Yorkshire and Humber |
| 3121 | 62 | Female | Teacher | South East |
| 3137 | 34 | Female | Housewife | Wales |
| 3207 | 39 | Male | Not known | Scotland |
| 3230 | 64 | Male | Technical author | West Midlands |
| 3351 | 26 | Male | Clerk | Yorkshire and Humber |
| 3371 | 51 | Female | Farmer/housewife | Wales |
| 3388 | 54 | Female | Housewife | South East |
| 3402 | 40 | Female | Domestic nurse | East Midlands |
| 3418 | 50 | Female | Railway clerk | East of England |
| 3426 | 46 | Female | School medical inspector | Yorkshire and Humber |
| 3634 | 59 | Male | Civil servant | East of England |
| 3648 | Not known | Female | Weaver | Yorkshire and Humber |
| 3650 | 24 | Male | Unknown | Unknown |
| 3655 | Not known | Male | Journalist | Scotland |