The Good Politician

Folk Theories, Political Interaction, and the Rise of Anti-Politics

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discontinuities in these data, making analysis of long-term historical change difficult though not impossible. In Chapter 3, we focus on survey responses and use a variety of techniques to analyse them. Trends for distrust in government and politicians can be constructed from BSA and Ipsos MORI data respectively. Comparisons for a range of dimensions – including perceptions of politicians' motivations, perceptions of citizens' efficacy, judgements of how the system of government is performing, and judgements of politicians' conduct – can be constructed using data from a range of research projects and commercial polling operations (Gallup, YouGov, the Hansard Society, Ipsos MORI, the BSA survey, the BES). Finally, and most importantly, a long-term index of anti-political sentiment can be constructed from these and other datasets using Stimson's dyad-ratios algorithm (see Chapter 3).

Even before we consider the survey responses, however, we can learn something from the questions researchers have asked at different historical moments. The concerns of researchers do not simply mirror the concerns of broader society. But researchers are situated in broader society and often attempt to reflect the concerns of their fellow citizens in their research – especially when research is focused on public opinion. So what did researchers perceive to be significant in British political culture during the period in question? In the 1940s and 1950s, they responded to perceived concerns about the performance of specific governments and leaders. In the 1960s, they responded to those concerns plus concerns about the efficacy of citizens and the performance of parties. In the 1970s, they responded to those concerns plus concerns about the performance of a variety of political institutions. Since the 1980s, they have responded to all these concerns plus newly perceived concerns about the motivations and conduct of a 'political class' now broadly drawn to include politicians but also officials and experts.

Survey data, therefore, help to provide a long view of anti-politics in the UK. But they are limited in terms of availability and thus in terms of the kinds of analysis they support. Survey data, of course, are also limited when it comes to the second aim of our research: to listen to citizens' voices, speaking in their own terms, on formal politics. For these reasons, we now turn to an alternative, supplementary dataset offered by the case of the UK.

Mass Observation: An Alternative Dataset

MO was established in 1937, the same year BIPO began polling British citizens. It was established to record the everyday lives of ordinary people

in the UK and, importantly for us, to enable the masses to speak for themselves and to make themselves heard above the noise of the press and politicians claiming to speak in their name (Hinton 2013a). Initially, most of MO's commissions came from the Ministry of Information. Gradually, more and more came from private companies wanting market intelligence (ibid.). MO became a private company itself in 1949 (Mass Observation Ltd) and continued to trade after 1970 as M-O (UK) Ltd – though by that time it was hardly the same organisation in terms of personnel, focus, and activities (ibid.).

In its original incarnation, MO collected material by two general means. A team of 'mass observers' recorded observations, overheard conversations, survey responses, interview responses, and ephemera between 1937 and 1960. Then a panel of volunteer writers, between 400 and 1000 strong (depending on the year), kept monthly diaries (1939–1965), completed day surveys (1937–1938), and replied to quarterly open-ended questions or 'directives' (1939–1955).

In 1969, a deal was struck with the University of Sussex to archive the papers of MO. The Mass Observation Archive was formally opened in 1975. In 1981, the archive founded the Mass Observation Project, reviving the panel of volunteer writers. To this day, directives are still being sent three times a year to approximately 500 respondents.

MO sources have been used by many historians and social scientists who value their richness, frankness, and historical depth (e.g. Hinton 2010, Kushner 2004, Kynaston 2007, Langhamer 2013, Savage 2010). Indeed, a few scholars have used MO to study citizens' orientations towards formal politics around the middle of the twentieth century (Fielding 1992, Fielding et al. 1995, Jefferys 2007). They draw on MO sources to argue against the popular view of a democratic 'golden age' immediately after the Second World War and for a revisionist account of continuity in which Britain's political culture has long been anaemic and characterised by populism, not least because of endemic tensions at the heart of democracy. We have learned a great deal from these studies. But we have also identified two weaknesses or gaps that we seek to address in this book.

MO collected data from 1937 to 1965 and again from 1981 to the present. This offers the possibility of using MO for historical-comparative analysis between the mid-twentieth century and the turn of the twenty-first century. But this is not what has generally been done by existing research, which has tended to take the short view of a decade or two and to evaluate it not against other decades or periods but rather against the often implicit normative standards of the researcher(s). For example, of

the 1950 General Election, Steven Fielding and colleagues (Fielding et al. 1995: 193) write:

> Only about one-third of the electorate regularly listened to party political broadcasts. A study [by MO] of 600 voters in six London constituencies found that one week before polling day, 86 per cent of the sample had not attended a political meeting and 44 per cent had not read an election leaflet. Over 60 per cent were unable to name all the candidates standing in their area.

Reading this, we might ask: Should we expect more than one-third of the electorate to listen regularly to party political broadcasts? Moreover, should we expect more than two-fifths of the electorate to be able to name all the candidates standing in their area? By what standards should we assess these figures? By the standards of an earlier or later general election, which we are not given in the text? Or by some universal, ahistorical, normative standards, which are implicit in the construction of these sentences – 'only about one-third' – if not made explicit by the authors?

This problem of taking the short view and making judgements on the basis of it, without the comparative perspective a longer view provides, is evident not only in how MO sources are sometimes used and interpreted. For example, here is Kevin Jefferys (2007: 83) on citizens' judgements of politicians in 1944:

> When asked to agree with one of three statements about politicians in a BIPO poll in August 1944, as many respondents saw them as out for themselves (35 per cent) as trusting them to do what was best for the country (36 per cent) . . . on the basis of this poll – taken shortly after D-Day, when politicians' prestige might be expected to have been high – it seems certain that widespread cynicism about politicians has been endemic throughout the history of British democracy.

There seems to be quite a leap here between the evidence presented and the conclusion drawn. But setting that to one side, we might ask again: Should we expect different proportions for 1944 and on what basis or by what standards? We actually do have historical-comparative figures for this survey question because Gallup asked it again in 1972 and YouGov asked it again in 2014 (commissioned by the project behind this book). While the figure of 35% for 1944 may have seemed high when viewed in isolation, the corresponding figure for 1972 was 38%. For 2014, it was 48%. On the basis of responses to this particular survey question, cynicism – in so far as the question captures generalised distrust (something else to set aside for now) – looks to have become more widespread over time.

If existing uses of MO to study popular understandings of formal politics have tended to take the short view and to lack a means of evaluation by historical comparison, they have also generally relied on summaries of the MO data produced by MO researchers of the time (in the form of File Reports, Topic Collections, and MO publications). Such a reliance is not required of scholars, in that 'raw data' collected by MO are available via the archive for original systematic analysis. Such a reliance is also problematic. Historians such as Jefferys claim to be writing about 'ordinary people' (pxi), providing 'a history of modern British democracy through the eyes of its people' (p3), and providing 'a history of democracy from the "bottom up"' (p5). But often, that is not quite the case. Jefferys relies heavily on the eyes of MO researchers, who were not really 'ordinary people' located at the 'bottom'. He reports that 'Mass Observation investigators were struck in the early part of the [1945 general election] campaign by how many people, in all regions and social groups, took refuge in apathy or cynicism' (pp77–78). '"At no time", Mass Observation concluded [in its study of East Fulham during the 1945 campaign], "could it really be said that the people showed excitement"' (p81). 'Mass Observation reported in May [1947] that "there is a great deal of apathy in Britain today"' (p112). 'In Hendon North, [a] Mass Observation worker, writing up daily observations [in 1950], claimed there was "very little election atmosphere in this constituency"' (p115).

These observations, reports, and conclusions of MO investigators and workers sound plausible. But we should be cautious about relying on such mediated interpretations. MO researchers were 'activators', in David Kynaston's (2007) terms: particularly active post-war citizens, continually disappointed by the relative apathy of their fellow citizens (which may not have been apathy at all, if measured by a different and less-demanding standard). We should also note James Hinton's (2013a) view of MO publications from the 1940s and 1950s. He identifies a theme of popular scepticism regarding the promises of reconstruction. Cynicism and apathy followed recollections of betrayal after the First World War and more recent experiences of delayed implementation of the Beveridge Report. There was a new focus on independence, autonomy, and personal pleasures. This theme in the publications of MO may well have accurately reflected popular understandings at the time. For Hinton, though, it also served an institutional purpose for MO. The theme was that scepticism, cynicism, and apathy would threaten the success of post-war reconstruction unless politicians used MO's research to understand and communicate better with citizens. Through its publications, MO positioned itself as indispensable to the authorities of the time – by claiming that people were apathetic and

indifferent yet, at the same time, primed for engagement (if only the authorities could learn how to appeal to them).

In view of the preceding discussion, we did not wish to rely on existing summaries of the MO data, just as we did not wish to compare a short view provided by MO to our own normative standards. Instead, we sought a long view, allowing for comparison between the immediate post-war period and the current period and founded in original systematic analysis of the 'raw data' collected by MO.

Sampling the Archive

As mentioned previously, one means by which MO collected material in the 1940s and 1950s was a team of mass observers who recorded observations and overheard conversations. Anthropologists at the time, including Bronislaw Malinowski, criticised these untrained mass observers for their amateur ethnography that spoke as loudly of their own prejudices as it did of the everyday lives of their intended research subjects (MacClancy 1995). For this reason and our desire for a dataset allowing historical comparison between the mid-twentieth century and the turn of the twenty-first century, we focused our research on the second general means by which MO collected material: the panel of volunteer writers, which Dorothy Sheridan (1994) describes as the most unmediated layer of the archive and which ran originally from 1939 to 1955 and then again from 1981 to the present.

Across both of these periods, we identified thirty-three directives – sets of questions sent to panellists every three or four months – asking panellists to write about formal politics. From these, we selected thirteen directives that asked mostly about the activities and institutions of formal politics in general, did not repeat questions from directives only a year or two previously, and covered the two periods so often compared – whether explicitly or implicitly – in debates about anti-politics: the so-called 'golden age' of British democracy and the so-called 'age of anti-politics'. Dating of the former period was relatively straightforward. The end of the Second World War provided an obvious starting point. The year of 1955, when the original panel ceased to exist, provided a necessary end point. Dating of the latter period was more complicated. Should it start in 1981 when the Mass Observation Project re-established the panel of volunteer writers? This would fit with our argument in Chapter 3 that anti-political sentiment – measured by things like trust in government or politicians – has been on the rise now for more than a couple of decades. But it would pose some practical problems – for example, providing a period of thirty-four years to compare to the early period of only ten

years. Or should it start in 2001, when voter turnout in the British General Election – which is associated with anti-political sentiment (see Chapter 1) – dropped to 59%, having previously not fallen below 72%, and the volume of talk about anti-politics rose accordingly? Or should it start in 2015, when the proportion of votes won in the general election by the populist party UKIP – also associated with anti-political sentiment (see Chapter 1) – increased to 13%, having previously not reached higher than 3%, and the volume of anti-politics talk rose still higher? In the end, we chose the period 2001 to 2015. This covered the years when all indications of anti-political sentiment were at their strongest. It also had practical benefits, in that directives on formal politics existed for this period – more so than for the last two decades of the twentieth century – and this period was broadly comparable in length to the earlier, already established period. A final point on the selection of directives is that we commissioned our own directive from the Mass Observation Project in spring 2014, repeating questions from the earlier period that had not yet been asked in the later period. Full details of the selected directives can be found in Table 2.2.

This sample, covering two periods separated by almost half a century, allowed for comparative-static analysis (Hay 2002). We are aware of the strengths and weaknesses of this form of analysis. It makes visible the extent and direction of change over time but not the pace of such change. It also encourages a view of historical oppositions or dualisms ('the golden age' and 'the age of anti-politics', for example). Given these weaknesses, throughout the book we seek to supplement MO data with survey data, allowing for diachronic analysis – the tracing and charting of change over time to establish its temporality – and helping to place MO writing in historical and social perspective. Taken as a whole, the book uses each form of data and analysis to confirm the other.

Placing the MO data in social perspective is especially important because of concerns about the social constitution of the MO panel. For Tom Jeffrey (1978), the original MO was a social movement of the radicalised lower middle class. For Hinton (2013a), while not all the original panellists were lower middle class, that group was certainly over-represented, along with people from London and the South East and people of the Left. To address these concerns, we read the MO writing alongside the survey data. We also sampled within the MO panel, following the example of Andrea Salter (2010). Age, gender, occupation, and place of residence were available for most panellists (either from MO's database of panellists or from the responses themselves). We sampled sixty respondents for

automatically and intuitively, without a great deal of concern (Kuklinski and Quirk 2000). Their judgements in this 'fast thinking' mode (Kahneman 2011) are likely to be partial and prone to bias. A second front in this conflict emerges when it comes to cumulative judgements by citizens. The optimistic line is that individual errors cancel one another out and that public opinion moves roughly in line with real-world events. The counter-argument is that if individual judgements are prone to the same biases and the same limited information sources, then there are few grounds for assuming wisdom in the crowd. To some extent, the variance between these arguments is about a difference in starting point. The optimistic line of argument is premised on emphasising the idea that citizens are not clueless, while the alternative focuses on the bounded quality of judgement (Kuklinski and Quirk 2000).

Most work drawing on this debate about political judgements refers to the bounded nature of the rationality used by citizens in placing their vote in an election or making a policy choice. We focus on diffuse support for the political system rather than support for particular candidates or policies, but our assumption would be that the same cognitive rules apply to these political judgements as well. From the perspective of seeking to understand shifting patterns of anti-politics, the insights from the cognitive sciences suggest that the way that citizens reason about politics is not an approximation to the rational actor favoured by some democratic and constitutional thought but an altogether messier and flawed process. Citizens reason, yes, but not always consciously, logically, unemotionally, or in direct tune with their interests. We need to take into account 'real reason – what the cognitive sciences have discovered about how we really think' (Lakoff 2009: 220).

Building on that insight, our argument can be broken down into four propositions. First, humans reason about the political system mostly in fast thinking mode and employ narratives and stories developed in that mode to explain how politics works. Second, it is possible to identify 'folk theories' about politics, which are distinct from beliefs or ideologies and perform the functions of helping citizens to understand politics, to explain their position to others, and to make political choices. Third, between the middle of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century, the folk theory of stealth democracy used by a critical mass of British citizens mutated into the folk theory of stealth populism. One set of expectations – that politicians should be sincere, hard-working, able, and moderate and that many politicians are such *politicians for the people* – was replaced by another: that politicians be *for* the people but also *of* the people ('normal' and 'in touch') and that many politicians are *not* such 'good' politicians. Fourth, this development frames the contemporary

expression of anti-politics and the dilemmas associated with achieving political competence and engagement in democratic societies at the beginning of the twenty-first century – given the inherent limits to our cognitive capacities. The underlying argument of our book is that citizens have become more negative about their political system in response to both conscious reflection and less conscious cognitive changes in how they understand politics and shifting patterns of engagement with politics. Giving citizens more facts about politics or explaining the way the political system works – classic political education – is unlikely to change their outlook; an issue explored when examining the construction of reform measures in the Conclusion. To challenge anti-politics, we need to change people's narratives about and experiences of politics.

Reasoning about Politics

How do citizens reason about politics? Colin Hay (2007: 162) argues that we still know very little 'about the cognitive process in and through which they come to attribute motivations to the behaviour [they] witness, or how [they] come to develop and revise the assumptions about human nature [they] project on to others'. Yet reason they do, not as omniscient calculators but with bounded rationality. Starting with the pioneering contribution of Herbert Simon (1985) – who emphasised the idea that human cognition is limited – and with the considerable input of the cognitive sciences, we can agree that citizens reason, in the sense they have reasons for doing what they do, but those processes of reason are framed by the bounds of their cognitive capacity and the environment in which they are located (Lupia et al. 2000).

Without denying the scope for further research and developments in understanding, it can be argued that we have a range of firm insights to aid our capacity to explain the limits to human cognition. One helpful starting point is dual process theory that rests on a distinction between two types of cognition: System 1 and System 2. The terms 'System 1' and 'System 2' were first coined by Stanovich and West (2000), but the ideas and experimental work on which they draw have a longer history. Table 9.1 presents a representation of some of the properties of each system of reasoning that are open to individuals to use. Following Daniel Kahneman (2011), we refer to these two systems as fast and slow thinking modes. The differences between System 1 and System 2 reasoning reflect relative rather than absolute divisions (Stanovich and Toplak 2012), and not all features outlined in Table 9.1 have to be observed for a certain type of thinking to be identified as present. Overall, the fast thinking of System 1 operates quickly and automatically, generates

Table 9.1 *Properties of fast and slow thinking (adapted from Stanovich and Toplak 2012)*

System 1 (fast thinking)	System 2 (slow thinking)
Intuitive	Analytic
More influenced by emotions and feelings	Less influenced by emotions and feelings
More automatic	More controlled
Relatively undemanding of cognitive capacity	Capacity demanding
Relatively fast	Relatively slow
Parallel	Sequential
Innately present but also acquired by exposure and personal experience	Learnt more by formal tuition and culture input

impressions and inclinations, and infers and invents causes and intentions. Type 2 thinking, by contrast, requires a lot more effort. It involves concentration and is experienced more directly as conscious reflection and as a choosing between cognitive alternatives.

Thinking in System 1 mode is the dominant form of human reasoning. There are many kinds of this type of thinking, and they come from different sources and paths. Some are innate to the human condition, the product of evolution and reflective of the need for humans to respond quickly and effectively to a complex range of ever-changing messages about their environment, as in the flight response when a surprise threat arises. System 1 thinking is an invaluable tool in a complex world where information is limited or difficult to process. Its role is to enable people to make sense of their world. 'The main function of System 1 is to maintain and update a model of your personal world, which represents what is normal in it . . . it determines your interpretation of the present as well as your expectations of the future' (Kahneman 2011: 71). Yet as Kahneman (2011: 85) comments: 'The measure of success for System 1 is the coherence of the story it manages to create. The amount and quality of the data on which the story is based are largely irrelevant.' System 1, in short, is quick to judgement, and its guess may be good enough, but it is prone to systematic errors.

Critical voices have been raised against dual process theories. Some query whether there are two coherent types of reasoning and argue that there is a single process going on (Osman 2004). Others question whether there are only two forms of reasoning and speculate about there being more (Moshman 2000). The critique that has gained most traction is one aimed at definitional issues and the boldness of the distinction between the two forms of reasoning (Evans 2012) and the less explored

weaknesses of Type 2 reasoning. These challenges, however, are not sufficient to prevent students of politics benefiting from using the distinction between fast and slow thinking. To understand anti-politics means understanding the narratives developed by System 1 fast thinking.

It means also exploring the environments that help to shape the development and deployment of those narratives. In particular, it may be that cognitive limitations could be overcome by the role of institutions that can frame and shape the decisions of citizens. Lupia and McCubbins (2000: 47) argue that 'political institutions make it easier for citizens to learn *what they need to know* by affecting citizens' beliefs about who can and cannot be trusted'. Their suggestion is that citizens need relatively modest amounts of knowledge to make reasoned choices and that institutional devices can provide a substitute for more detailed information about politicians' character – by telling citizens that the politicians they have an interest in, for example, will face punishment for lying or will have to verify their claims. In short, creating institutional devices that give the chance of providing a credible commitment could help the citizen take a shortcut in their decision-making. Another line of argument is that affective or emotional experiences may focus people's attention on an issue or provide them with the appropriate cues to make a decision and therefore could be a functional asset to them in low information contexts with modest cognitive effort (Marcus et al. 2000, Rahn 2000).

The possibility of the environment shaping understanding is a valuable insight, but from the perspective of our interest in anti-politics, the lessons to be drawn from the evidence presented earlier in this book are that both the institutional and affective environments have turned against allowing citizens to judge better about who to trust or not to trust. In general, it would seem that institutions or emotions do not necessarily have to have a positive effect in terms of enabling citizens to act more effectively in making political choices. The effects could be negative, and that is what our evidence suggests they have been. The professionalisation of politics means that politicians are now less diverse as a group, so they are less able collectively to represent the different virtues expected of them. The contexts of encounter between politicians and citizens have changed so that modes of interaction afforded by media events and professionalised campaigning make it more difficult for politicians to perform virtues and for citizens to calibrate judgements. Over time, many citizens have become angered, sickened, and depressed by formal politics. In short, the institutional devices that might have promoted more trust in politics – by, for example, allowing politicians to perform acts of public speaking or campaign interaction that gave them credibility – have been downplayed, and those that create suspicion and doubt have been substituted. Add in

a more challenging and negative emotional environment, then both cognitive and environmental factors appear to be working together to intensify anti-politics.

Narratives about Politics: The Role of Folk Theories

Citizens understand politics using narratives and the relatively unconscious process of fast thinking. As George Lakoff (2009: 34) argues: '[W]e cannot understand other people without such cultural narratives . . . We understand public figures by fitting them into such narrative complexes. That goes for politicians as well as celebrities.' These cognitive maps also become cultural products when they are shared and circulated informally. One way of capturing the idea of cultural narratives is through the concept of folk theories (Holland and Quinn 1987, Lakoff 2002). People routinely develop their own theories to explain the physical, technological, and social phenomena they encounter. The concept of folk theories seeks to capture that process. As Willett Kempton (1986: 75) explains:

> Human beings strive to connect related phenomena and make sense of the world. In so doing, they create what I would call folk theory. The word 'folk' signifies both that these theories are shared by a social group, and that they are acquired from everyday experience or social interaction. To call it 'theory' is to assert that it uses abstractions, which apply to many analogous situations, enable predictions, and guide behaviour.

Folk theories are common-sense or taken-for-granted ways of understanding. Folk theories 'serve pragmatic purposes; they explain the tangible, the experiential . . . they hold sway in a realm in which exceptions prove rules and contradictions live happily together' (Keesing 1987: 374). As Quinn and Holland (1987: 3) suggest: '[A] large proportion of what we know and believe derive from these shared models that specify what is in the world and the how it works.'

Folk theories offer non-technical explanations of how things work that can be very different to the institutionalised, professionally legitimated conceptions held by experts and system designers. People understand the way thermostats work in a way different to engineers (Kempton 1986), or they can explain how Facebook posts appear at greater or lesser frequency on their screen but not in the same way as those who design the filtering algorithms that drive that process (Eslami et al. 2016). Similarly, citizens may understand politics but not in the same way as its practitioners or political scientists.

Folk theories are different from political beliefs or coherent ideologies. They are constructed more loosely and not as fixed. Folk theories

are not as systematic or coherent as more technical or specialised forms of knowledge or discourse. Rather, they 'comprise sets of short-cuts, idealisations, and simplifying paradigms that work well enough yet need not fit together without contradictions into global systems of coherent knowledge' (Keesing 1987: 380). Folk theories are the ways people try to make sense of what is happening. They are revised in the light of experience and reinforced by social exchanges. Folk models are often loosely constructed and act as both representations of how things are supposed to work and a more pragmatic guide about what to do. The models can take a variety of forms and are by no means easy to discern, since they are not always vocalised or rendered explicit.

Moreover, an individual's allegiance to a model may shift depending on the setting or context. In this sense, folk theories are not iron cages that determine thought patterns, but they may nonetheless prove important in guiding the reasoning used by people. One of the most important lessons from studying folk theories is that 'not all citizens have coherent ideologies' and it is 'normal for people to operate with multiple models in various domains' (Lakoff 2002: 14–5). However, people do not generally act randomly; rather, they tend to apply different models in different settings, orienting themselves to specific social and political practices in predictable but often context-specific ways.

Folk theories are what we need to orient ourselves to the situations in which we find ourselves – in order to act and to make sense of our world. In particular, they provide 'what one needs to know in order to *say* culturally acceptable things about the world' (Quinn and Holland 1987: 4). Folk theories are models in people's minds, but they are more than that in that they steer social acts (Malle 2000).

Lakoff (2002: 9–11) argues that such folk worldviews are composed of ways of categorising that are both commonplace and normal to the human mind. Typically, people can identify a category (e.g. a good politician); a typical case (a person doing something that matches the requirement of a good politician); an ideal case (a model politician); an anti-ideal or dystopic prototype (a politician who lies or is not authentic); a social stereotype to support snap judgements (politicians just have to open their mouths and lies fall out); a salient exemplar (someone who shows that it is possible to be a good politician); and an essential prototype (a set of properties or a model whose features, according to the folk theory, would be observed to enable us to know we were looking in practice at a good politician). As this suggests, folk theories tend to be developed through the application of categories and prototypes. As Lakoff (2002: 11) notes, 'none of this should be strange or unfamiliar.

All of these are normal products of the human mind, and they are used in everyday discourse. There is nothing surprising about their use in politics, but we need to be aware of how they are used.'

From Stealth Democracy to Stealth Populism

When discussing politics with others – or, indeed, explaining their position to interviewers – citizens use the forms of reasoning implied by folk theories. We argue that part of the explanation for changing patterns of anti-politics is a mutation of the stealth-democratic folk model used by many citizens to understand politics. In Chapter 6, we saw that stealth democracy was a prominent folk theory in post-war Britain. Many citizens believed democracy to be important. They felt a duty to vote. But they viewed party politics as just unnecessary mud-slinging and yearned for independent candidates, statesmen, coalitions, and national governments (working on behalf of a perceived singular local or national interest). In Chapter 7, we saw how some content of this folk model became changed over the second half of the twentieth century. In the years following the Second World War, many citizens expected politicians of competence and independence. By the early twenty-first century, many citizens expected politicians *for* the people (trustworthy, able, moderate, strong) but also *of* the people (normal and in touch with everyday life). Furthermore, in Chapter 8, we saw how contexts of political encounter in the immediate post-war period encouraged judgements of politicians as *representatives for the people.* In the later period, such contexts encouraged more negative judgements. In short, a critical mass of citizens used to expect government by representatives for the people and could imagine politicians – or enough politicians – as these competent and independent leaders. Citizens heard politicians give long radio speeches. They saw them handle rowdy political meetings. Over time, however, a critical mass of citizens have come to expect representatives *both for and of* the people. Furthermore, these citizens cannot imagine their politicians – or enough of their politicians – in this way. Citizens see the photo opportunities of politicians, hear their soundbites, note their gaffes. A stealth understanding of politics has transformed into a stealth populist understanding, by which many citizens imagine 'the people' – who largely agree and so just need action from competent, independent representatives – but also an incompetent and out-of-touch political elite (who act, the story goes, against the interests of the people).

Let us explore these folk models in a little more detail and see how they relate to the more formal technical models that might be used by politicians or political scientists. The stealth democracy model has been identified as present in the understanding of c[illegible]zens in a range of studies and

Table 9.2 *Comparing stealth democracy and elitist democracy*

	Folk model: Stealth democracy	Formal model: Elitist democracy
Typical case	Established post–Second World War democracies in North America and Western Europe	Established post–Second World War democracies in North America and Western Europe
Ideal case	A political system that delivers what citizens want	A political system that does not ask too much of citizens
Anti-ideal	A political system where there is all talk and no action, and unnecessary conflict	A political system that places too much influence on the voice of the public
A social stereotype to support model	Memory of a politician taking the right decisive action	Trusted and legitimate political elite
An exemplar or prototype	An effective politician	A deferential citizen

countries (Evans and Stoker 2016, Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002, Stoker and Hay 2017). We are not alone in identifying it as a folk model of democracy held by citizens. In the United Kingdom (UK), we argue that its heyday was in the second half of the twentieth century. During the early part of that period, its closest family resemblance in formal theory was the elitist democracy model (Held 2006, Walker 1966). The starting point for both models is an image of post-war western democracy, but at that point the two models diverge (Table 9.2).

The elitist model of democracy developed as a critique of the classical model that looked to provide more active citizen engagement. The critique was based on a view of citizen participation as both unrealistic (citizens have neither the time nor the inclination to participate extensively in politics) and undesirable (a fear of the role of demagogic leadership, mass psychology, group coercion, and mob rule). Democracy required citizens to select and endorse their leaders but stay out of the detail of policy-making and show trust and deference to those elected to carry out measures in the public interest.

The stealth model shares some of the same ground but heads off in a different direction. It too thinks that citizens should not be expected to do too much or put too much effort into direct engagement, but this is not because citizens cannot be trusted or lack capacity. Rather, it is that citizens have busy lives with better things to do than political engagement. Moreover, since most sensible people agree on what is the right thing to do, then citizens should be able to expect political leaders to get on and take the action necessary without detailed oversight or input from

Table 9.3 *Comparing stealth democracy and stealth populism*

	Stealth democracy	Stealth populism
Typical case	Established post–Second World War democracies in North America and Western Europe	Twenty-first century democracies, old and new, that have a highly professionalised and media-dominated politics
Ideal case	A political system that delivers what citizens want	A political system that is failing to deliver what citizens want
Anti-ideal	A political system where there is all talk and no action, and unnecessary conflict	An anti-system or anti-establishment politician
A social stereotype to support the model	Memory of a politician taking the right decisive action	Politicians that are 'bland but hiding an ulterior motive below that'.[1]
An exemplar or prototype	An effective politician	A smooth-talking politician who is all spin and no substance

citizens. The fear in this model is of politicians that put party conflict or personal interests ahead of doing the right thing. But the hope is that there are enough good politicians around to make for effective government. Stealth democracy sees citizens combine fear of politicians creating division and selling out on their promises with some faith that the political system can still deliver enough – without requiring a more sustained level of political participation from themselves. Citizens reason that they do not want to pay much attention to politics, but they do want it to work for them in the background, quietly and efficiently dealing with those issues which need to be managed collectively. The stealth democracy view is that politics should work smoothly and competently for citizens – rather than requiring a great deal of effort from them – and it stands a good chance of doing so if the right kind of politician is in charge.

We argue that, by the early twenty-first century, this stealth understanding of politics had transformed into a stealth-populist understanding. Now, many citizens imagined 'the people' who share a common interest but also an incompetent and out-of-touch political elite who act, if at all, against that interest. The stealth perspective has mutated as a folk theory from a grudging hope that the political system might deliver to a populist expression of angst, railing against the failing of democratic politics. The differences between the stealth democracy folk narrative and its populist replacement are presented in Table 9.3.

[1] Panellist W5214, male, 28, literary events coordinator, London (spring 2014).

The stealth populist folk theory offers a distinctively more negative view of the political system than the far from rosy depiction provided within the stealth democracy narrative. It has become more prominent among citizens in the early twenty-first century. The judgement of many citizens has shifted from one view of a political system that might deliver to another view of a system that cannot deliver. Politicians should be close to the people, empathetic, and engaged but also effective and determined to keep their promises. Stealth populism wants politicians who deliver, but in addition to the requirements of the stealth democracy narrative, politicians should be *of the people*. These qualities are conspicuous by their absence in twenty-first-century British politics. Politicians are seen as non-entities, bland, sneaky, liars who apparently break promises as regularly as they breathe. The political system has become a focus for angst and disappointment. The journey captured in the chapters of this book has been from scepticism to cynicism, from stealth democracy to stealth populism.

Where Next for Democratic Politics?

Cognitive studies tell us that 'not only are citizens minimally informed . . . but [they] are also prone to bias and error in using the limited experience they receive' (Kuklinski and Quirk 2000: 182). Many citizens find the machinations of the formal political system to be disappointing and alienating. Although citizens remain interested in political ideas and choice, many feel that formal politics, as it is currently offered to them, is not going to deliver on their concerns. Cognitive limitations join negative narratives and failing institutions to provide the perfect storm that is driving anti-politics.

This chapter has argued that significant cognitive limitations are faced by citizens in approaching the political system. They engage with politics largely in a fast thinking mode that allows conscious reflection to be dominated by unconscious and largely negative framing. Overall, the fast thinking of System 1 operates quickly and automatically and generates impressions and inclinations and further infers and invents causes and intentions. Yet it is possible to offer, with only a little effort, a partial list of the multiple biases in judgement that tend to creep in under System 1 reasoning. System 1 is biased to confirm existing explanations, neglects ambiguity and suppresses doubt, focuses on existing evidence rather than new evidence, uses potentially misleading prototypes to make judgements, will try to answer an easier question rather than a harder one, overweighs low-probability actions in coming to a judgement, is more sensitive to change than stable states, can exaggerate risk based on high-

intensity or -profile events, is more concerned about loss aversion, and frames decisions narrowly. 'System 1 is highly adept in one form of thinking – it automatically and effortlessly identifies causal connections between events, sometimes even when the connection is spurious' (Kahneman 2011: 110).

The folk theories or narratives that citizens tell themselves about politics are far from positive. Indeed, more generally it could be argued that fast thinking about politics is prone to presenting and supporting negative understandings (Stoker et al. 2016). A significant proportion of citizens has gradually moved from a grudging acceptance of the stealth-democratic idea that politics might deliver, to the more angst-ridden certainty of stealth populism and the belief that politics cannot and will not deliver. The most prominent folk story of politics at the beginning of the twenty-first century describes an activity dominated by bland, self-interested, and out-of-touch politicians. The cognitive approach to politics is framed by fast thinking, and the narratives that have been created are strongly negative.

It could be that institutional or other interventions might challenge some of these cognitive biases or negative narratives, but the professionalised character of politics, its slick marketing and sloganising, and its determined effort to stay on message has meant that many citizens have lost what little capacity they had to distinguish between good and bad politicians and parties. People are more than capable of using information and making decisions under favourable conditions. People can usually engage in complex tasks like making friends and parenting and, given training, can easily undertake more complex tasks – from engineering to running businesses. There are major obstacles, though, placed in their way when it comes to judging politics (Kuklinski and Quirk 2000). First, the business of politics is complex and involves a multi-faceted mix of deciding about evidence, values, the positions of others, power dynamics, and acceptable outcomes. Second, political debate rarely has as its goal to provide reliable information; its focus is more on persuasion. Third, there are few opportunities given to citizens for thinking carefully about politics. Finally, there is rarely any useful feedback provided in a way that might help time-poor citizens to make decisions.

The dilemma for the future of democracy is clear. Anti-politics frames the debate, and we cannot wish away the factors lying behind it. The cognitive dynamics that steer our understanding of politics will remain in place. The narratives about politics that show it as practised by politicians who are failing cannot easily be overthrown. The institutional practices of politics that are reinforcing negativity on the part of citizens have a logic of their own in the context of a professionalised, media-driven, and

marketing approach to the delivery of politics. To argue that we need better political education overlooks the dynamics of fast thinking. To call for more citizen engagement and deliberative-democratic innovations runs counter to a widely held stealth view that politics should deliver without requiring too much input from the public. To ask politics to change its ways without a capacity for credible commitment to do that from all competitors is perhaps to ask too much. Our research has helped us to frame the problem of anti-politics. In the Conclusion, we see if we can address that problem, but in a way that is consistent with our research findings.

Conclusion

There is a need to provide an overview of the argument so far, and this task occupies the first section of this chapter. Our book contributes at four levels. First, there is an element of conceptual clarification regarding how to understand the term 'anti-politics' and relate it to other more established concepts. Second, overcoming several methodological challenges, we bring into play empirical data from Mass Observation (MO) and a wide range of surveys and polls. Third, as we draw on datasets enabling us to take a longer historical view, we can show that although there never was a golden age when citizens were enchanted by formal politics, the scope and intensity of anti-politics have grown over the decades. Finally, having taken this long view, we can sift through various explanations of trends in anti-politics and show that some explanations are more plausible than others. Our original contribution is an account of how anti-politics has grown because citizens' criteria for judging politics have become more demanding, and this development is compounded by the more restricted environment in which politicians and citizens now interact.

But our ambition in this concluding chapter goes beyond a restatement of our main arguments. It is to engage with the tricky issue of what if anything could be done about the problem of anti-politics. We think our analysis suggests that some of the common reform prescriptions might have only modest chances of addressing the problem. There has been much focus in contemporary democracies on citizenship education aimed at young people, constitutional reform, and new practices of participation and deliberation. We can concede that each of these reform strategies might be of value in itself, but none of them can really get to grips with anti-politics – if our analysis and understanding of anti-politics are correct. Negativity about politics is not exclusively an issue among younger citizens. Some constitutional reforms are too tokenistic to make a difference, and others do more to change the relationships between politicians and other elite decision-makers than shift ingrained negative patterns of interaction between citizens and politicians. Citizen

participation and deliberation initiatives tend to be attractive options for only some citizens and appear to have little impact on restoring trust in the political system. Our view is that the challenge of reinstating a better balance in the dynamic between politicians and citizens requires us to accept those features of the relationship that cannot be changed and identify some that can. We make suggestions for reform measures that could address the complex dimensions of anti-politics that our study has revealed but recognise further research and the trialling of options are needed.

The Argument So Far

Anti-Politics: An Attitudinal Definition

We defined anti-politics as citizens' negative sentiment towards the activities and institutions of formal politics. Our focus, then, is on what other scholars have referred to as political alienation or withdrawal of political support or political disaffection. Anti-politics in our study is largely captured by shifts in the attitudes of citizens towards politicians, politics, and the political system. Our argument touches on two other ways of defining anti-politics. The first sees it as an opportunity that has been exploited, as reflected in the rise of populism. Anti-elite politicians rail against the corrupt politics of the establishment and present themselves as champions of the people. The second sees anti-politics as a strategy used by those very elites to keep issues off the political agenda and control the democratic process, offering citizens only an anaemic and controlled form of political engagement.

We see merit in these other depictions of anti-politics but suggest that the danger of these approaches is that they contain ready made within them an answer to the questions that we argue can be explored empirically: Has anti-politics grown, and what are its causes? Both the alternative definitions assume that anti-politics has grown and offer competing explanations of its emergence – one focused on the failings of the political system to deliver and the other on the usurpation of democratic processes by political elites. We argue, rather, for a more empirically grounded approach and, of course, for taking the long view of anti-politics. What we do share with many other studies is a sense that anti-politics matters. A certain degree of scepticism about politics is healthy in any democracy, but not when it is associated with non-participation, non-compliance with legitimate laws, or support for aggressive forms of populism that undermine the mutual respect and tolerance essential to the practice of democracy. Anti-politics can make government more difficult, and it may

lead to the neglect of so-called 'wicked' or difficult-to-resolve issues and long-term challenges as politicians fear they lack the legitimacy to engage with citizens over these issues. Nor do we assume that negativity towards formal politics is being cancelled out by citizens' positive sentiment towards informal politics (the democratisation thesis). Our evidence suggests that many citizens are not clamouring for more opportunities to participate. They have an interest in politics – and indeed do self-organise collectively – but we cannot assume that this engagement is a replacement for connecting to formal democratic processes.

Meeting the Challenge of Taking the Long View

We took a longer view of anti-politics than has been taken by most researchers to date, covering both the so-called current 'age of anti-politics' and the so-called post-war 'golden age'. This longer view was possible for the case of the United Kingdom (UK) because of two datasets: collected survey and opinion poll data (which date back further for the UK than for most other countries) and volunteer writing from MO (a unique dataset). These datasets each had their own strengths and weaknesses. Used together, they allowed us to generate new insights (most often from the MO data) and confirm those findings (most often using the survey data).

Regarding the MO material, we undertook our own systematic analysis of the 'raw' data rather than using the summaries produced by MO's own researchers (which is what most existing studies have done). This involved sampling thirteen 'directives' or occasions when MO asked its panellists to write about formal politics across the two periods. Then we sampled sixty panellists per directive to construct datasets broadly representative of the UK population (by gender, age, region, and occupational category) and broadly comparable between the two periods. Then we read this material for the cultural resources used by panellists to write about formal politics – categories, storylines, and folk theories – focusing especially on those resources shared by a broad range of panellists (and so presumably circulating in wider society at the time, to be used by citizens in the construction of understandings, expectations, and judgements regarding formal politics).

The analysis of survey data also required some innovation as tracking long-term trajectories of political disaffection in a way that overcomes data limitations poses a substantial methodological challenge. Survey questions relevant to the problem of anti-politics are relatively scarce prior to the 1970s, and for various reasons, different questions and variations of questions are more prominent in some time periods than others.

We overcame this obstacle in two ways. First, we used trend data from repeated survey measures and supplemented this with comparison of responses to survey questions asked at different points in time. Second, we used Stimson's dyad-ratios algorithm to construct an over-time index of political discontent that combines data from multiple poll series.

The Expansion of an Anti-Politics Mood

Moving from methods to results, we established that no golden age of political engagement existed in the UK. A substantial proportion of citizens even in the 1940s were dissatisfied with government, thought politicians to be 'out for themselves', thought politicians to be 'not straight-talking', expected contradictory things of politicians, or at least found politicians difficult to judge. Nevertheless, and contrary to claims of trendless fluctuation or Britain's unchanging anaemic political culture, we established that anti-politics increased in the UK over the second half of the twentieth century in three respects: social scope, political scope, and intensity.

More citizens from across all social groups now judge politicians and politics to be flawed. If anything, older citizens are slightly more negative than younger ones. But the main point is that disillusionment with politics is not confined to one social group. Furthermore, anti-politics has increased in political scope. Citizens hold more grievances with formal politics. As the twenty-first century gets into its stride, they judge politicians to be self-serving and not straight-talking but also out of touch, all the same, and a joke. One of the features of the evidence from MO panellists was the increased intensity or strength by which the criticisms of politics found expression. In the period immediately after the Second World War, respondents wrote about politicians in relatively measured terms. This finding cannot be dismissed as simply a reflection of a general culture of deference at the time. In the same responses, they wrote about doctors as 'selfish' and 'ignorant', scientists as 'inhuman' with 'one-track minds', and lawyers as dishonest, thieving 'sharks'. By the early twenty-first century, stronger negative terms for these other professionals were not really apparent in the writing of MO panellists, but such strong terms were now prominently used for politicians. Citizens described their 'loathing' for politicians who made them 'angry', 'disgusted', and 'depressed'.

Explaining Anti-Politics

We cast doubt on some existing influential theories explaining the rise of anti-politics. We noted earlier some doubts about the decline of deference, given that deference was rarely found in the MO responses of the

1940s. The flip side of the decline of deference thesis is a set of theories about the rise of critical or assertive citizens who are secure, educated, and keen to take the initiative in making societal decisions. But our citizens in the more recent period sounded angry, sickened, and depressed – rather than critical – and these feelings were targeted specifically at politicians (as opposed to all figures of authority). It would be fair to say that, in the round, British citizens are not moving along post-material tramlines towards a new, assertive culture of critical citizenship. Rather, evidence points to an entrenched anti-politics mood; a sense of feeling terminally let down by the political system and frustrated by the antics of politicians.

We noted that anti-politics is also explained by some as the product of a watering down of political choice. According to some theories of depoliticisation and post-democracy, a neo-liberal consensus gripped formal politics from the late 1970s onwards, and the more controlled and limited form of politics on offer pushed citizens into a minimalist role. Together, these factors had the effect of turning many away from political engagement. We found some MO panellists writing about contemporary politics dismayed by the lack of choice offered by the main parties. However, it should not be assumed that citizens were content with party politics in previous eras, as some post-democracy theorists imply. Indeed, in the mid-twentieth century, many citizens struggled to see the need for party politics at all. They judged politicians to be compromised by party discipline (to be professional politicians and 'partymen'). They viewed party politics as just unnecessary mud-slinging and axe-grinding. They longed for independent statesmen, coalitions, and the national governments of recent war-time. We argue that citizens were not positively engaged with formal politics in the 1940s and 1950s simply because politicians and parties were clearly distinguishable along ideological lines, so we must look elsewhere – beyond accounts of depoliticisation and post-democracy – to explain fully the rise of anti-politics.

Beyond offering critiques of established theories, we offered a new explanation of anti-politics based on two ideas. First, we showed that popular images of the good politician have changed. The new image is rooted in the professionalisation of politics, the ideology of intimacy, and democratic egalitarianism. Second, we argued that this new image is more difficult for politicians to perform. It is more demanding, since it asks politicians to be not only *for* the people – to be honest, capable, moderate, and strong – but also *of* the people – to be 'normal' and 'in touch' with 'real' life and 'ordinary' people. In addition, the professionalisation of politics means that politicians are now less diverse as a group, so they are less able collectively to represent the different virtues expected of them. Furthermore, the contexts of encounter between politicians and citizens

have changed. The modes of interaction afforded by media events and professionalised campaigning make it more difficult for politicians to perform virtues and for citizens to calibrate judgements.

Responding to the Evidence: Reform Options

Citizens at the start of the twenty-first century appear to want a multi-faceted relationship with their elected representatives but are offered a series of one-dimensional experiences that disappoint and frustrate and so provide the driving force behind negative attitudes towards formal politics. In thinking about how to respond, it is important to follow through on the thread of evidence presented in our book. Beyond that, there seems little point in arguing for reforms that would require a political process that asked more from human cognition than could reasonably be expected and more from a political system than could reasonably be delivered. Most citizens are highly likely to continue to pay attention to politics to a limited degree and will use a combination of fast or intuitive thinking and, to a lesser extent, slow, reflective thinking to deliver their judgement on politics. Most political systems will – in the context of global forces, entrenched inequalities, and imperfect implementation practices – continue to generate a certain degree of disappointment. Indeed, as one of our group of authors has argued (Stoker 2006/2017), political systems are characterised by designed-in disappointment. As a centralised form of decision-making, politics is inherently controlling. It may protect freedoms, but it does so by imposing collective choice over individual choice. To take part in politics is time-consuming and challenging – given the scale and quality of communication that is required and the challenge of using voice but also listening to others. Finally, the outcomes of the political process are seldom clear-cut and often messy compromises.

For long periods, there appears to be nothing noble about politics at all. Politics, after all, is a battle for influence and the exercise of power. That this activity involves politicians in hustle, intrigue, lies, and deceit provides little surprise to most citizens who have long understood that politics is prone to such a dynamic. Politics has the quality of being both the decent pursuit of the common good and a rather unedifying process that involves humans behaving badly. So, any reforms offered will have to embrace this split personality of politics and work with the grain of an inherently imperfect system. In the discussion that follows, we review some widely advocated and implemented reform measures and indicate why our evidence suggests that success might be limited. We then move on to consider some non-standard responses that might be worthy of further consideration and trialling.

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