

Back to the ballot box

Our journalist **Ella Rhodes** meets researchers in psychology and politics in search of answers to voter apathy

When most people think of a healthy democracy they imagine, in Abraham Lincoln's phrase, a government 'of the people, by the people, for the people'. But that is only possible if the people get involved, and right now, it seems, more and more of us are sick and tired of politics. On the eve of every general election we hear murmurs about voter apathy, and this time around they seem to have grown louder. Comedian-turned-revolutionary Russell Brand, who was placed fourth in *Prospect's* list of the world's most prominent thinkers, recently declared politics as 'dead'.

The problem of low turnout in elections is an international one, with the US mid-term elections in 2014 witnessing what has been called 'the least representative election in modern American history' (tinyurl.com/obejjwv). And not only has turnout declined over recent years, it's also becoming increasingly unequal as younger and less affluent citizens remove themselves from the electoral process (tinyurl.com/ofhssjj). Yet political engagement is possible: consider the 85 per cent turnout in the Scottish independence referendum, a figure so high that it led the Russian authorities to make accusations of 'North Korean' style irregularities!

In the UK, MPs have endorsed proposals from the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee, aimed at bringing us to the ballot box. These include making the day of each general election a national holiday, automatic

registration, and trials of voting on the internet. But are these merely sticking plasters for our ailing democracy? Can psychology get at the underlying causes of engagement – or disengagement – with politics? I spoke to several psychologists and political scientists for a variety of perspectives on these questions.

From the global to the personal

Perhaps the main thing pushing people towards the polling station is the prospect of effecting real change in an area of significance to them (although this could be as much something that affects a group with which they identify or their family as something which impacts them personally). This could explain the high turnout in the Scottish referendum, and the large numbers who swept the 'anti-austerity' party to power in Greece. And this prospect may diminish as our personal worlds expand.

Social psychologist Professor Steve Reicher (University of St Andrews) points to large-scale structural processes that may have contributed to a disillusionment with politics. 'Globalisation, the rising power of international corporations and of transnational bodies like the EC gives a growing sense that politicians can no longer affect the things which govern our lives. The end of the Soviet Union, the narrowing of ideological alternatives, and the feeling that all politicians are the same (and generally not in a good way) has increased the perception that "they are all

as bad as each other", and that electoral choice is therefore illusory.'

What can politicians do about this? Reicher refers to the use of symbolic politics in order to make oneself seem distinctive: the Labour Party targets the non-doms to position themselves as the party of 'working people' against the rich; the Conservatives target inheritance tax to position themselves as the party of aspirational workers against welfare dependants. But at the same time, Reicher stresses, both parties are, if anything, even more afraid of seeming distinctive. 'So the Labour Party use their manifesto launch to emphasise that they won't tax or borrow more and the Conservatives use theirs to make pledges on childcare and the NHS,' says Reicher. 'In this era of political cross-dressing, to cite the BBC's Nick Robinson, it gets harder and harder to tell political parties apart. It gets easier and easier to see all politicians as a single category – and, what is more, a category that is neither "of the people" nor "for the people".'

Trust between citizens and politicians

This illusion of choice and the shape-shifting tactics used by political parties may go some way towards explaining why politics and politicians are seen in strikingly negative terms. Across Europe in general, only 24 per cent of people say they trust their national government and only 14 per cent say they trust political parties. Not surprisingly, things are particularly bleak in the crisis-hit countries. In Spain, for instance, the figures are 11 per cent and 8 per cent respectively. But things are not much better in the UK where 31 per cent trust the national government, and 20 per cent trust political parties (figures from Eurobarometer 2013/14).

Some, even MPs themselves, lay the blame for this squarely at the door of individual politicians. Speaking to *The Guardian* (see tinyurl.com/mkyqc23), Green Party MP Caroline Lucas said Nick Clegg's reversal on tuition fees is

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Political engagement is possible: consider the 85 per cent turnout in the Scottish independence referendum

responsible for much of the cynicism about British politics today. 'What I can't forgive is that it was always difficult as an MP to say, "Trust me", but you can't say it at all now.'

I asked trust researcher Dr Nicole Gillespie (University of Queensland) why Clegg in particular appears 'tainted'. She pointed out that 'education fees are a very deep-rooted and important issue to much of the British public.' According to the research, this question – Do politicians adhere to values and principles important to the trustor? – relates to Integrity, one of the three key dimensions people assess trustworthiness on. The others are Benevolence (Do they have genuine care and concern for their constituency?), and

Competence (Do they have the knowledge, skills and abilities to competently perform their role?). Gillespie said: 'Distrust in politicians frequently stems from a perceived lack of integrity, particularly not following through on pre-election promises, and distrust in government typically stems from the perception that they are unable to deliver to expectation. Over-promising and under-delivering is a guaranteed way to erode the trust and confidence of the public. Politicians need to better manage the public's expectations about what they can and can't deliver.'

Gillespie added that people and leaders can recover from a broken promise if there's an external cause or uncontrollable change that has led to the breaking of that promise. However, in a study following the UK MP expenses scandal, Dr Gillespie and her colleagues were surprised to find that of the 478 MPs that had an expense-related allegation against them, less than 5 per cent acknowledged their transgression and apologised for it. This is despite the fact that 66 per cent of MPs with allegations had subsequent published evidence

indicating guilt. Rather, the majority of MPs responded with justifications and denials (56 per cent and 49 per cent, respectively). This is troubling from a trust perspective, says Dr Gillespie, and is likely to be a key factor in voter apathy.

Gillespie also points out that in the age of the internet and globalisation, mistakes become known quickly and widely, and the failures of politicians have more currency than the good news stories. 'So politicians feel more nervous about what they say and might come across as evasive. It's challenging for politicians to maintain a broad base of trust given some of these changes to politics. They may also feel they are not free to say what they believe or stand for because of pressure to maintain the party line.'

A psychoanalytic approach

There may be another reason why 'over-promising and under-delivering' is particularly damaging to political engagement. Political theorist Professor James Martin (Goldsmiths, University of London) uses psychoanalytical ideas in his research into political speech, and he argues that 'Political behaviour is often not very rational at all – what grips us instinctively may be any number of things that speak to an unacknowledged sense of hurt or anger, loss or potential fulfilment.' Engagement becomes an expression of an individual's sense of self and their subconscious desires. 'Sometimes people don't explicitly know why they believe what they do, they feel it as a gut instinct, it "calls" to them and they respond by identifying.'

"politics and politicians are seen in strikingly negative terms"

Professor Martin believes that as older identifications with political parties subside, we find we simply cannot tell, as commentators and analysts,

what might happen in elections: '...the public's dissatisfaction at politics does not supply an obvious location for investment but rather, many. We tend to think it a sign of trouble that we can't predict what will happen in an election. But in many ways this is simply a truth about our own psyches – it is not automatic what it is that will grab our attention and call up our allegiance.'

Martin also pointed to issues that cause anger and hostility in leading people to engage with politics. He said: 'Hostility to immigration, for example, is a persistent, unresolved sore in British culture that gathers around it a surprising amount of anger and prejudice that

New media and the 2012 election. *Social Science Computer Review*, 31(5), 527–541. Zhang, W., Seltzer, T. & Bichard, S.L. (2013). Two sides of the coin assessing the influence of social network site use during the 2012 US Presidential campaign. *Social Science Computer Review*, 31(5), 542–551.

political engagement

certainly motivates people to come out onto the streets and to validate all sorts of hostile political argument. The important point here, however, is less the merits of the issue and how it might practically be resolved than what grievances are invested in it, how some people manage to hook their desires, their fears and aspirations, in this rather than in anything else.'

Has the immigration question become, in Freud's terminology, a fixation? 'It is a symptom that substitutes for all sorts of desires and disappointments,' Professor Martin says, 'not least the failing of established politics to evenly spread wealth and opportunity. It serves as a point of emotional eruption to activate people's sense of grievance, not simply as a genuine problem awaiting solution. So in some ways, it is the failure to shift political ground that leads to some issues becoming sources of motivation and stimulants to participation.'

'It has become carnivalesque'

Not all are convinced that appealing to the hopes and fears of individuals is the most constructive way to hook people into politics. The media is so often the driving

force behind a party's success at a general election, but could the personalised, piecemeal approach of mainstream news programmes and newspapers actually be detrimental to engagement?

James Moir, a sociologist and member of the International Society for Political Psychology (Abertay University), argues that there is a widely held view, largely disseminated through the media, that voters should have opinions about political matters, or indeed the political process itself (Moir, 2010). Dr Moir says: 'This individualises the political process and reduces it to a matter of intra-psychic cognitions and perceptions rather than dealing with "big" ideological issues. Basically what I have argued is that we are surveyed and opinion polled out, so to speak... "big" politics has given way to a minutia of issue-by-issue concerns – a little like a shopping basket approach. The media are saturating us with this and so to my thinking it is no wonder that it has become carnivalesque and something of a turn-off for many.'

In his other work (Moir 2013a, 2013b), Moir focuses on the idea of political communication as performance, echoing Marshall McLuhan's famous saying 'the medium is the message'. He points to a research tradition that has

examined performative aspects such as the use of metaphors, three-part lists, intonation of voice, and so on. News websites and the use of Twitter or YouTube videos by politicians creates a new arena of performance for politician, one in which there is a blend of both the formal and informal. Does it work? 'Well, that's the question,' says Moir. 'It did for Obama in his two presidential campaigns, where his Twitter machine went into overdrive and where he was able to connect with younger voters. This sense of being in touch with politicians and the idea of their human, authentic side is now much more of an issue – the politics of personality in a new guise over, yet again, actual political commitment. Having said this, the recent referendum in Scotland showed that it is possible to engage the public in "big" political debate, but of course this was a big one-off issue. Will performance win out again in the forthcoming general election?'

The outsider

Some politicians find this performance easier than others. In particular, those who initially appear to be the underdogs of the political world often go on to capture the attention of large swathes of the

population. Consider the oppositional views of Russell Brand, or the burgeoning popularity of UKIP's Nigel Farage (for an analysis of UKIP's rise, see Robert Ford and Matthew Goodwin's *Revolt on the Right*).

Politics researcher Tereza Capelos (University of Surrey) points me to a study in the US that found people hated Congress but tended to love congressmen. She said people tend to have a negative relationship with the political system as a whole, thinking it impenetrable or inconsequential. 'But if you delve a little deeper you find these people aren't that cynical, but that cynicism is the norm. So anyone who can portray themselves as an outsider to the political system has a benefit because they don't have that stain of all that negative general stuff that goes with being an in-the-system politician.' (Consider Nigel Farage's approach in the televised leaders' debate: 'I warned you at the beginning, they are all the same. They don't understand the thoughts and aspirations of ordinary people.')

Capelos said there was another psychological system at play in these cases. Once a political party has been in government for a while, the honeymoon



Does the voting process itself impact upon political engagement? See also our Research Digest round-up on the psychology of politics on pp.354–357

period of hope and election promises is over and people start to become critical of the party's record in delivering policy. 'Governments after their first term never score as highly on opinion polls as when they're elected. When a party becomes incumbent it gets negative flak from voters and usually loses voters, the opposition get more voters, that's why democracy works.' In the run-up to an election, 'outsiders can rely on that distant hope... they don't have expertise or a demonstrated ability, they can portray themselves as they wish. Anyone who comes in as an outsider doesn't have the stain of the political system that so many people feel negatively about.'

Outsiders may look to draw attention to that stain, to play on the negative emotions of the electorate. But Capelos warns that although 'negative sells', at the same time it makes people disengage politically: 'They feel alienated and that they've had enough of politics. Media portrayals of politics and politicians which are more edgy and negative can alienate the electorate in the long run but in some environments it can inspire political movements, such as the use of social media in the various political uprisings in the Middle East.'

An inconsequential illusion of participation?

This use of social media, blending the formal and informal, is a relatively new arena for politics. This year in February the networking giant Facebook reminded its users to register to vote, potentially reaching out to millions of young people throughout the UK. But with an estimated 1 million people dropping off the electoral roll over the past year, many of them young people and students, does social media engagement translate to actual votes and political action?

Political psychologist Rodolfo Leyva (Middlesex University) says the literature on social media and political engagement gives a polarised view on the topic. The more optimistic side claims that social media, including blogging, content sharing and social networking, are helping to reverse inequalities observed in voting participation. 'These studies suggest that social media are enabling a greater number of people to be exposed to more political information and to actively participate in political discussions, which is leading to a rise in formal political and civic engagement. This is shown in the 2013 study by Towner and another in the same year by Zhang [et al.], that the effect is particularly seen among young people



Charles Clarke, British Labour politician and Visiting Professor of Politics at the University of East Anglia

'Campaigning, working in local politics, it's all driven by the same thing, to try and improve the society and world in which they live. There are a very small number of people who do it because they want to gain a certain status in society, but I think that's very much an exception.'

'If people see a government that's frozen or unable to act in actually improving the world, and see problems existing that the political structure doesn't really address properly, they lose confidence in the idea that politics can make a change. The more you're able to bring people into your confidence – to explain what the problems are, what you're trying to do, where you've failed and where you haven't – the more genuine that exchange is, the more people have confidence.'

'In my experience working at the University of East Anglia, many young people are deeply interested in politics. I don't think it's true that young people are intrinsically less interested in politics and the welfare of society, it's that politics doesn't always make itself easily accessible to them.'

and working-class participants, who are generally disengaged from the electoral process.'

On the opposing side, some studies suggest that social media only helps to increase benign online political engagement, such as clicking 'Like' on a Facebook post. Leyva adds: 'A study last year by Lewis and colleagues on the impact of Facebook on online mobilisation and commitment to the Save Darfur cause, which at its height listed 1.2 million members, found that Facebook created an inconsequential illusion of active political participation that quickly diffused. In other words, in this case, Facebook did not function as an effective tool for generating dedicated and sustained political engagement even at the online level.'

Leyva admits that this more sceptical and critical literature is 'rife with the same theoretical, conceptual and methodological limitations as its optimistic twin – for example, non-representative samples, rigid and simplistic conceptions of political engagement, and/or reliance on self-reported measures'. But she concludes that she does share the concern 'that social media may be socialising and habituating emerging adults into forgoing meaningful offline political engagement in favour of relatively banal online political actions'.

An even bigger worry is that online, people can modify their user settings to only read stories that confirm and conform to their political predispositions. Some research has investigated this potential source of political fragmentation and intolerance, finding that people do indeed select and pay more attention to

political information they agree with (Garrett, 2009; Graf & Adday, 2008; Knobloch-Westerwick & Kleinman, 2012; Knobloch-Westerwick & Meng, 2011). However, Leyva added: 'The results also show that participants will in the second instance select content with dissonant information, albeit they will spend less time reading it. Although this research is still developing, it thus far suggests that people will not automatically avoid content with dissonant information.'

Time for you to engage

How do we reverse political disengagement? Half of political science and much of psychology is devoted to this question, so we could never expect to get to the bottom of it in a brief article. But our readers have shown a willingness to engage politically over the years, for example with repeated discussions in these pages over the impact of austerity measures. So we hope the perspectives presented here will serve as a bridge to other sources, and a spark for further discussion and debate. For example, does the voting process itself impact upon political engagement? Is the selection process producing an unrepresentative bunch of MPs we then struggle to identify with? Might the era of 'rainbow coalitions' simply be too complex for the average person on the street to engage with? We would like to hear from you on all these angles and any others – e-mail psychologist@bps.org.uk or comment on the online version of this article via www.thepsychologist.org.uk.

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