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**The veil of duty: can dutiful forms of citizenship mask feelings of political dissatisfaction?**

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# The veil of duty: Can dutiful forms of citizenship mask feelings of political dissatisfaction?

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## Abstract

It is widely acknowledged that political dissatisfaction is rife across many established democracies, and yet we generally know very little from citizens themselves about what might be driving this disaffection. Where attention has been paid it typically focuses on groups whose relationship with politics is deemed problematic for one reason or another (e.g. young people). Those with higher rates of political participation are often overlooked, but if participation is undertaken by such people because they feel a sense of duty and obligation then we have little reason to accept their engagement as tacit approval of the political system or status quo. This paper explores the question of how those at the normative core of citizenship feel about electoral politics. It uses data from the Mass Observation Project to explore feelings of electoral dissatisfaction amongst dutiful citizens over the seven UK elections between 1983 and 2010. The findings show that high participation and adherence to dutiful norms of citizenship can mask profound and sustained feelings of political dissatisfaction.

**Keywords:** British politics, citizenship, dutiful citizenship, political dissatisfaction, political participation, political disengagement.

## Introduction

This paper aims to contribute to our understanding of political (dis)engagement and dissatisfaction through an examination of the political experiences and interpretations of those at the core of normative citizenship. Many established democracies have witnessed considerable electoral disengagement in recent decades. In response, public debate and social research has tended to focus on young citizens who vote less frequently and are less committed to, and oriented towards, electoral politics. In contrast, this paper draws attention to those dutiful citizens who typically are politically engaged. By drawing upon qualitative longitudinal data generated by the Mass Observation Project between 1983-2010, this research shows that high levels of participation and political engagement can mask profound and long-standing feelings of dissatisfaction. As such, the crisis of legitimacy facing many established democracies may run much deeper than often thought. Dutiful citizens may be bolstering political participation figures whilst harbouring strong discontent with the state of contemporary politics. The article begins by outlining the literature pertaining to citizenship norms across generations and the broader research on political disengagement and dissatisfaction. This is followed by a discussion of the rich qualitative data, methods of analysis and the findings of this study.

## Literature Review

During the past several decades a range of measures have indicated that political disengagement and dissatisfaction is widespread across many established democracies (Dalton, 2004; Hay, 2007; Mair 2013). Some social groups have come under scrutiny as their relationship with electoral politics

is deemed particularly problematic. Young people, for example, have been a particular focus of concern. The electoral disengagement of young citizens has been accounted for by their lower levels of knowledge and interest in politics (Park, 2004; Wattenberg, 2011). Others argue that we are witnessing a shift, driven by young people, away from duty-based notions of citizenship towards more personalised and self-actualising forms of citizenship (Bennett, 2008; Dalton, 2009; Hooghe and Oser, 2015).

Older people are often regarded as exemplars of citizenship and used as yardsticks of socio-political participation. Putnam (2000, p. 140) famously celebrated the 'long civic generation', those 'exceptionally good citizens' born between 1910 and 1940 who were seen to be more actively involved in social and political life than subsequent generations. British research reveals similar generational differences. For example, older generations are more likely to vote (Dar 2013) and they are also more likely to believe 'it's everyone's duty to vote' (Lee and Young 2013, see also Clarke et al. 2004; Blais and Rubenson 2013). Older generations are more likely to identify with a political party (Lee and Young 2013) and more likely to have been involved with political parties as members, activists or ex-members (Whiteley 2011). In addition to the importance older generations place on voting and participation, they are also more respectful of the law, more trusting of police and politicians and more satisfied with British democracy (Pattie et al. 2004). Looking across generations, recent decades have witnessed considerable increases in the numbers of people *unwilling* to be involved with civic-political participation (Pattie et al. 2004: 271-72) and the belief that citizens are obliged to vote has also been in decline (Curtice 2012). Hence, the generations born before 1960 tend to be more involved and committed to electoral politics. They also have a stronger sense of their duties and obligations as citizens. The citizenship norms of these dutiful citizens are more deferential and engaged with the state and politics than younger generations who are typically more educated, demanding and critical of governments and have broadened their political participation beyond electoral politics (e.g. Norris 1999, 2011; Dalton 2009).

Despite the exultation of 'the long civic generation' by some, we know very little about their understandings and perceptions of politics beyond various abstract quantitative measures of political efficacy, regime performance or trust in politicians and governments. Furthermore, if their relationship to politics can be characterised by notions of duty and a moral obligation to participate then we have little reason to accept their engagement as tacit approval of the political system or status quo. Amongst those living in established democracies, older generations developed relatively strong habits of democracy (Franklin 2004) which have largely ensured their participation, but has it masked their criticisms and dissatisfaction with electoral politics?

Hay and Stoker (2009, p. 233) claim there is a 'big unknown in how [citizens] come to understand politics'. While concern over young people's apparent disengagement from electoral politics has led to research on their understandings and practices of politics (e.g. Marsh *et al.*, 2007; Harris *et al.*, 2010), in general we know very little about how citizens understand and interpret politics. Focusing on the UK, we do know that turnout at general elections has been below 70 per cent since 1997, with significantly lower turnout amongst younger voters (Ipsos MORI 2015). Recent representative British survey results (Hansard Society 2015) reveal a range of indicators suggesting British citizens are far from satisfied with the state of electoral politics: almost 70% of respondents thought the UK's system of government needed improvement; nearly 60% felt the UK's democratic system did not address their interests or those of their family; over 50% of respondents felt authorities do not uphold standards in public life and 36% thought standards in public office were low. In addition, levels of trust in government and politicians have notably declined in recent decades (Lee and Young 2013). As such, the contours of political disengagement, and some measures of political dissatisfaction, have been mapped by quantitative surveys, but knowledge of citizens' discontents remains underdeveloped.<sup>1</sup> Understanding how citizens perceive and experience politics has become more pressing as electoral disengagement has escalated across many established democracies, and

seems particularly pertinent for the group held up as model citizens whose behaviour should be emulated.

In addition to work on young people's conceptions of politics and citizenship, a small number of studies have begun to explore these issues for older citizens. Van Waller's (2010) interviewees experienced politics as disjuncture. Politics was seen as remotely producing alien policy which was then imposed upon the life-world of citizens. A study of letters to the editor of a prominent Dutch newspaper identified three discourses of political dissatisfaction, indicating that discontent is not homogenous amongst citizens (Kemmers *et al.*, 2015). Holmes and Manning (2013) explored political disengagement amongst members of the British white working class and found both calls for political reform as well as strong feelings of alienation from a political elite who were perceived as distant and uninterested in participant's socio-economic struggles (also Manning and Holmes, 2013). These are welcome contributions and their various methodological approaches provide access to citizens *own* understandings of politics and citizenship. Further, they allow citizens to be *active* participants in the interpretation of politics.<sup>2</sup> The present study builds on this body of work by focusing on the normative core of citizenship. Given the trends described above we would expect younger citizens to be critical of and dissatisfied with electoral politics, but how do older and more dutiful citizens feel about democratic politics? Do higher rates of voting and 'traditional' forms of civic participation mask feelings of dissatisfaction and disaffection with electoral politics amongst dutiful citizens? To help address some of these questions I have drawn upon the Mass Observation Archive's holdings of responses to UK elections between 1983 and 2010.

The next section provides a discussion of the data generated by the Mass Observation Project and the methods used for this study. This is followed by a discussion of the study's findings.

## Methods and data

As suggested above, research and public debate about electoral (dis)engagement and political disaffection typically focuses on groups whose relationship with politics is deemed problematic for one reason or another (e.g. young people). Those who regularly participate are often overlooked, but if participation is habitual and undertaken by such people because they feel a sense of duty and obligation then we have little reason to accept their engagement as tacit approval of the political system or status quo. It is also indicated above that the study of political (dis)engagement is typically explored through quantitative data and measures of electoral turnout, party membership, political efficacy, trust and so on – little research explores citizens' perceptions and experiences of electoral politics in their own words. Moreover, much of this research tends to be cross-sectional in design and only provides a 'snapshot in time', rather than following participants across time. This research seeks to address these shortcomings by drawing upon the British Mass Observation Project (MOP).

The MOP is a volunteer writing project and is predominantly comprised of texts written by a semi-permanent panel of approximately 500 volunteers. Panellists respond to set 'Directives', groups of questions or prompts sent out by post or email several times a year. Directives are wide ranging and cover aspects of everyday life as well as reflections on major events or MOP writers' lives and experiences. The MOP is a revival of the original Mass Observation which ran from 1937 to the early 1950s (Hubble 2010). In its current form the MOP has been running since 1981; between 1983 and 2010 the Archive issued Directives addressing each of the seven UK general elections during this period. This material provides a unique resource for exploring citizens' understandings of their political (dis)engagement overtime and there is a wealth of relevant data to explore.

For the analysis presented in this paper, I sought to construct a sample of dutiful citizens. As such, I deliberately selected those MOP writers who had contributed to the most number of election

Directives and ensured an even gender split, resulting in a sample of 10 men and 10 women. Female Observers had responded to more elections during the period than men, with five of the ten women selected having responded to all seven election Directives and the remaining five responding to six. None of the male Observers responded to all seven Directives, resulting in a sample of two male Observers who responded to six of the seven Directives and a further eight male Observers who responded to five Directives. The resulting corpus was comprised of 65 separate responses to elections from women MOP writers and 52 from men, totalling some 720 pages. While the sample is not representative of the British population, there is some variation in terms of occupation and the regions in which Observers lived. It is also noteworthy that the sample is quite old, given that one only need be born by 1965 to have been old enough to vote in the 1983 election. The older, more female (in terms of responses) and more middle class features of the sample largely reflect the profile of the Mass Observation panellists (Shaw, 1994). As such, the sample does not provide for representative coverage of the British population, but does provide a unique qualitative and longitudinal resource rich in detail and personal experiences. Furthermore, the Mass Observation archive is an excellent place to source more dutiful citizens as it is constituted by those who volunteer for a social history project. Table 1 provides an overview of the sample.

Table 1: Sample overview

| Mass Observer ID | Gender | Year of Birth | Occupation               | Voting preference              | Region        | Number of responses |
|------------------|--------|---------------|--------------------------|--------------------------------|---------------|---------------------|
| C108             | Female | 1936          | Clerk <sup>3</sup>       | Lib-Dem (& volunteer)          | London        | 7                   |
| D996             | Female | 1927          | Advice worker CAB        | Lib-Dem (& volunteer)          | London        | 6                   |
| G226             | Female | 1941          | Counsellor/researcher    | Lib-Dem (party activist)       | NW            | 7                   |
| H260             | Female | 1930          | Shop worker 'manageress' | Labour                         | SE            | 6                   |
| H266             | Female | 1923          | B&B/restaurant worker    | SDP-Labour                     | East Midlands | 7                   |
| K310             | Female | 1928          | Shop worker              | Floating voter                 | SE            | 6                   |
| P1009            | Female | 1940          | Teacher                  | Private <sup>4</sup>           | Wales         | 6                   |
| R1760            | Female | 1930          | Civil servant            | Labour                         | SE            | 6                   |
| W632             | Female | 1941          | Business analyst         | Labour (Councillor)            | SE            | 7                   |
| W633             | Female | 1942          | Journalist               | Private                        | NE            | 7                   |
| B1989            | Male   | 1927          | Teacher                  | Lib-Dem (Councillor)           | SE            | 5                   |
| B2240            | Male   | 1921          | Pensions advisor         | Lib-Dem (former active member) | SE            | 5                   |
| D1602            | Male   | 1942          | Company executive        | Conservative                   | London        | 6                   |
| F2218            | Male   | 1929          | NHS Supplies officer     | Various (& non-voter)          | NE            | 5                   |
| H1543            | Male   | 1930          | Local govt officer       | Various                        | SE            | 5                   |

|       |      |      |                       |  |               |   |
|-------|------|------|-----------------------|--|---------------|---|
| L1504 | Male | 1926 | Administrator         | Lib-Dem                                | SW            | 5 |
| P2034 | Male | 1927 | Teacher               | Conservative                           | East Midlands | 5 |
| R470  | Male | 1934 | HGV Driver            | Various (former Labour party activist) | SE            | 6 |
| R1418 | Male | 1922 | Decorator             | Various                                | East Midlands | 5 |
| W1893 | Male | 1924 | Food industry chemist | Labour (member)                        | East          | 5 |

The election Directives covered in this paper were varied in form. Directives often sought the factors determining one's vote or decision not to vote; some Directives asked for comment on specific features of an election – campaign styles, experience of door-to-door canvassing, how election night itself was spent, overheard comments and discussions; and requests for election diaries featured for the 1997, 2001 and 2010 elections. Most Directives were issued before an election while the Directive for 2005 was issued after the fact and was included with other major events to be reflected upon for that year – the G8 summit, London's bid for the 2012 Olympics, the Make Poverty History campaign. In addition to variation in the Directives issued, MOP writers respond in a variety of ways and not always in accordance with those writing the Directives (Harrison and McGee 2003). For example, while Directives routinely ask for the interpretations of MOP writers, by asking for their 'thoughts', 'feelings', 'reactions' and 'considerations' about elections and campaigns, large sections were often given over to quite dry description and commentary of political events. For example, in the excerpt below from 2010, G226 discusses her morning after the second leader's debate of the 2010 election campaign:

We listened to reports on BBC Radio 4 this morning (instead of Classic FM) and even bought a copy of *The Guardian* which I devoured sitting in the summer house this afternoon. (We normally only get the paper on a Saturday). Election leaflets from the Conservative and Labour candidates arrived with today's post. We had one from the Green Party a few days ago [...]  
(G226, Female, 2010, Spring Directive)

In contrast to the example given above, the analysis for this paper focused on Observers' more sustained interpretive and evaluative comments as these provide greater insight into their feelings and experiences of electoral politics.

While the 27 year time span covered by this dataset might suggest the merits of a narrative approach to analysis, I have eschewed this for a thematic approach. The analysis progressed iteratively and inductively to allow themes to emerge from the data (e.g. Braun and Clarke 2006). Working with physical copies of each Mass Observer's responses to election directives in chronological order, the data was read, biographical notes were made and responses were loosely coded, with link made across elections. Reading like this for the first stage of analysis helped the author develop familiarity with each Mass Observer and their relationship to politics over time. After this first flush of coding, data excerpts were transcribed by the author. This second phase of analysis involved reading and re-reading excerpts and complete responses to refine codes and assemble crosscutting themes.

The decision to employ thematic analysis was in part taken because the required biographical depth<sup>5</sup> is not always present. Further, as indicated above, responses often do not take a narrative form –

moments of narrative sit alongside dry description, reflections and interpretations of events and individuals. A thematic approach also provides for a greater focus on a broader range of MOP writers' concerns. Using thematic analysis allowed me to identify themes which cut across the sample and featured in responses to several or all elections. This approach necessarily limits the detailed coverage of election-specific context or an individual's longitudinal relationship with electoral politics. These aspects of the data will be pursued in future publications. Nonetheless it is hoped that the richness of the presented data furnishes the reader with a sense of participants and their (dis)connections, criticisms and frustrations with politics. For now, a thematic analysis reveals powerful, enduring and crosscutting criticisms of electoral politics from citizens who generally take politics and the responsibilities of citizenship seriously.

### **The obligations of citizenship**

The first characteristic to note about this group of MOP writers is that they are dutiful citizens, they feel an obligation to participate in electoral politics and government and stay abreast of socio-political events (e.g. Dalton, 2009). From Table 1 it can be seen that several have been active members or volunteers of political parties and two have served as Councillors. In addition to these activities, voting was understood as 'the core democratic act' (Bennett 2008, p. 14), it was highly valued by all respondents and many discussed its importance:

I feel we should all vote after all, women fought very hard for it [...] My first memories of voting go back to 1931, when my mother aged 30 was able to vote for the first time. I was seven, we, my brother, father and mother went in the pony and trap... (H266, F, 1992, Spring Directive)<sup>6</sup>

I would always use my vote. As a woman, I know how hard it was fought for. I would never vote for a party because my husband, family, friends etc. vote that way. I have always felt able to make up my own mind. (G226, F, 1983, Spring Directive, emphasis in original)

[...] I am quite sure it is the duty (old-fashioned word!) of everyone to vote since they are lucky enough to live in a country where ballots are not rigged. (D996, F, 2001, Spring Directive)

I did vote in the general election. Indeed I have voted in every general election since I came of age, apart from the General Election of 1950, and subsequently I regretted not having voted. I always vote because I feel that I have a duty to do so. If I did not vote I would have no right to complain about actions of government. (B1989, M, 2005, Summer Directive)

I shall definitely vote as I always have done. I really believe all eligible citizens should do likewise, whatever their political views might be. I am too much aware of the effort and sacrifices made by men and women in the fights to obtain Universal adult suffrage to feel otherwise. (W1893, M, 2010, Spring Directive 2010)

The struggle for suffrage was readily brought to mind by these respondents and the sense of duty to exercise their vote was closely connected to the collective achievement of winning suffrage. Several women respondents remarked upon women's fight for the vote while others emphasised the general struggle for universal political rights. These exemplary quotes also capture the way respondents inflected their comments on voting with obligation; they feel strongly that citizens have a 'duty' to vote and that it is something we 'should' all do.

Even when respondents felt very dissatisfied with their politicians and their options at elections, they still valued the act of voting (Coleman, 2013). R470, a heavy goods vehicle driver, described himself as a socialist and felt increasingly disaffected with the Labour Party's shift to the right. Despite his sense that there was no real difference between Labour and the Conservatives, he did not want to be labelled apathetic if he chose not to vote:

Enough of Iraq, back to the real problem of the election, where if anywhere do I put my cross? If I decide to abstain pundits will label me apathetic. (R470, M, Summer Directive 2005)

Similar sentiments were expressed by W633 who did not want to spoil her ballot paper, but also did not want to vote for any of the candidates on offer:

I did vote, because I always do, but I did feel like writing 'no suitable candidate' on my ballot paper. We ought to have a 'none of the above' box. (W633, F, 2001, Spring Directive)

In line with these views about voting, electoral politics was viewed as important and consequential, warranting the attention and participation of citizens. Reflecting the stronger partisanship characteristic of these generations, several respondents expressed desires to emigrate if/when election results went against their preference. The importance of electoral politics was also observed in other ways, as first seen in these powerful comments from a Conservative voter at Labour's victory in 1997, and then through a comparison of the importance accorded to sport relative to politics:

Finally, the one item that "struck me" most of all. On the TV at the announcement of a Labour win in Yorkshire, the look on the faces of the New Labour young women. That is the same look I saw on similar faces when Peace was declared in 1945. Uncontrolled joy, relief, pleasure, 'a gloom taken far away.' (P2034, M, 1996, Autumn/Winter Directive)

My 30yr old son said he was already bored of the TV coverage. I said it will all be over in four weeks whereas the football and other sports coverage would continue week after week. I cannot comprehend the importance given to men playing games. (W632, F, 1992, Spring Directive)

Clearly, these respondents reflect dutiful norms of citizenship. They view electoral politics as important and feel a strong obligation to participate, particularly through voting. Many were also quite firmly attached to particular political parties. Voting was viewed as a duty and often understood as something fought for by previous generations – as indicated above, many female MOP writers linked their obligation to vote to women's struggle for suffrage. The age profile of the sample may also mean that respondents have a greater awareness of the precariousness of democracy, with many living through World War II or growing up in its aftermath. Indeed, some recalled powerful memories of voting and election days:

I first voted in 1945. I can't remember the procedure as I was behind the Japanese lines at the time. Probably I had an opportunity before I jumped in in early May. I was with three brother officers and I was the only non-Tory – we had some heated debates, as I did in another unit I was in earlier. The idea of an officer voting Labour seemed unbelievable to many of them. I was away with a few Levies when the result was declared and I delighted in the chagrin of the

others when they had to send a runner to me with a message that Labour had won. (B2240, M, 2010, Spring Directive)

Notwithstanding this attachment to electoral politics, reading through responses one is struck by the profound levels of dissatisfaction with the conduct and organisation of British democracy. While most participants continued to vote and participate in electoral politics, the Mass Observation Project provided respondents with a means to express their dissatisfaction and disillusionment with politics across a number of fronts.

### **Poor quality of public-political debate**

Complaints about the poor quality of public debate during elections were resounding and mentioned by almost the whole sample and often mentioned by the same respondent on multiple occasions. The ad hominem arguments of politicians were a recurring problem for C108, a carer and retired clerk. In 1987 she says, 'The mud-slinging gets monotonous.' (C108, F, 1987, May Special Directive), remarks echoed in 1992 and 2001. By 2005 she laments the loss of politicians and public figures who she thought were able to rise above the shrill bickering and trivial squabbles of the day:

I think we need some elder statesmen and the country needs less political correctness everywhere. I really mourn the deaths of Robin Cook and Mo Mowlam. People without side and ready to speak their minds. (C108, F, 2005)

Similar criticisms of the standard of debate were repeatedly noted by K310, a shop worker who described herself as a floating voter. The excerpt below comes from the 1997 election but she made analogous comments in 1987, 2001, 2005 and 2010:

As for the point scoring and bad behaviour of M.P.s it is simply unpalatable and is nothing to do with whether policies are right or wrong. [...] I think it was an awful campaign, the sophisticated manipulation of people, "sound bites", the insults, the personality promotions as if the two major contenders had magic wands – or the power of dictators – it was marketing gone mad [...] (K310, F, 1996, Autumn/Winter Directive)

Male Observers shared these views and again, complaints were made repeatedly over the time period:

And what irritates me as much as anything, especially at election times, is when one party launches a proposal or an idea (which they've obviously put very careful thought into) only for the other parties to immediately brand it as 'rubbish', or 'ill-conceived' or 'economically unviable' when they haven't had time enough to properly read it or cost it out. I find it all very childish in the extreme. (D1602, M, 2005, Summer Directive)

These comments by D1602, a newspaper executive and Conservative voter, were echoed for elections in 1997, 2001 and 2010. The addition of televised leaders' debates in 2010 did not improve matters for most respondents. H1543, a local government officer, felt they were undemocratic as they 'sidelined parties like the Greens and U.K.I.P. that had done well in last year's European elections.' (M, 2010, Spring Directive). R1418, a decorator, was equally unimpressed with the polished and rarefied nature of the debates:

a strictly managed 'debate'. All carefully prepared with known points to be referred to and no other questions allowed. What this is supposed to prove I have no idea. The smoothest-tongued and glibbest of the trio then being deemed the front-runner in the race to Westminster. I managed to sit through about twenty minutes of this meaningless trash before switching off and heading for more down-to-earth and common-sense reality of my local pub. (R1418, M, 2010, Spring Directive)

Respondents were also critical of the narrowness of debates, with many feeling like a range of important issues were ignored in favour of repetitious and frequently deceptive 'sound bites'. Criticisms were also levelled at the focus on 'point scoring', 'personal attacks' and 'slanging matches'<sup>7</sup> at the expense of considered debate, particularly about future plans for the UK. These views are well summarised by D996's comments from 2010:

Electioneering seems a process of endless repetition of the same truths, half truths and distortions, with huge areas of great importance being completely ignored. (D996, F, 2010, Spring Directive)

### **Mediatization and the withdrawal of politicians from local contexts**

A key social change operating in the background to respondents' criticisms about the poor quality of political debate is the increasing mediatization of politics (Strömbäck, 2008). Respondents commented upon the mediatization of politics in two principal ways – the tedious nature of the media's election coverage and the withdrawal of politicians from local contexts and face-to-face fora (see also Clarke et al. 2017). These aspects of mediatization are discussed in turn below.

Mediatization of politics does not intrinsically produce poor quality debate, but respondents were particularly critical of the media's tendency for blanket, exhaustive coverage. The comments below from L1504, an Administrator and Liberal/Liberal Democrat voter, reflect concerns raised by numerous respondents:

Where does all the world news go whilst we have an election? No earthquakes – no scandal, no labour unrest. Does everything and everyone stop, whilst we have an election? [...] It has been a long while, I would imagine, since a general election has been so boring for the man in the street and one assumes the all out bombardment from TV has something to do with this. (L1504, M, 1987, May Special Directive)

It is worth noting that MOP respondents were not alone in complaining about such coverage. Survey data has often found a majority feel there is 'too much' television coverage of elections – the figure climbed from 50% in 1983 to nearly 80% for 1992 (Nossiter, Scammell and Semetko, 1995: 87; for the 1997 election see Norris, 1998) Several respondents also thought the relentlessness and perceived monotony of election coverage was a factor in turning people off politics and voting. The excerpt below comes from R1760 in 2001, but similar concerns were raised by others for elections in 1987 and 1997 (despite the historic significance of the 1997 election).

I think the relentless emphasis on party political broadcasts and comment from the BBC and Channel 4 did much to sicken people of the whole business and could have contributed to the low turnout. (R1760, F, 2001, Spring Directive)

Most respondents noted and disapproved of the declining presence of politicians in local community life and that their access to the world of politics and politicians was increasingly mediated. A characteristic comment came from H260, a 'shop manageress':

There has been absolutely no sign of activity, by any party, with local canvassing. Tomorrow is the big day and I feel 'let down' by them all. The loudspeakers will be out begging us to vote, and yet not one of them has bothered to explain their policies to us. Can you wonder that some people are as apathetic as their treatment by the MPs? [...] Not a single knock at the door throughout the campaign by anybody. [...] All in all, it has been a bit of a let down after a big build up on the television. (H260, F, 1987, May Special Directive)

Other respondents lamented the increasing focus on party leaders and the resulting presidentialization of British parliamentary politics (Poguntke and Webb, 2005). Like others, P1009 remarked upon the media's personalisation of politics through a narrow focus on leaders at the expense of other holders of senior political office:

It was a much more presidential campaign than usual & we only saw the 3 leaders who all worked themselves into the ground rushing around the country in helicopters & battle buses. (P1009, F, 1996, Autumn/Winter Directive)

The lack of door-to-door canvassing by candidates was noted by numerous respondents. Others also observed the lack of party supporters calling on election day to ensure people had voted or to take the elderly or disabled to the polling station:

I still think these were the quietest elections I have known. Even our 'great-Auntie Grace' – through marriage – in her 80's, had to cycle to a poll booth!! (P2034, M, 2001, Spring Directive)

From the 1950s through to the 1990s this cohort of citizens witnessed a profound shift in electoral politics and campaigning. Politicians have increasingly withdrawn from the physical public settings wherein they traditionally met citizens and conveyed political messages in favour of mediated engagement, often aimed at a national audience, particularly via television. Where once constituency-based campaigns were the norm these are now being used sparingly in targeted seats with a greater overall emphasis on a national campaign. These shifts can be seen in the demise of election meetings. In 1951 around one third of British voters attended at least one public election meeting. By 1966 this figure was less than ten percent and by 1979 it was less than five percent (Lawrence, 2009). In addition, senior politicians are increasingly sealed off from the public through carefully orchestrated campaign appearances which function to minimise the risk of criticism or debate and show politicians in a positive light (e.g. Hardman, 2015).

It is also significant that this sample of dutiful citizens lived through and grew up in the aftermath of World War II. Ost (2004) argues that Hitler's conjuring of powerful emotions in politics, facilitating the widespread sanction of mass murder and resounding destruction for both the Allies and Axis countries, was decisive in having political elites rethink the place of emotion in politics. The post-war settlement saw the emergence of a managed capitalism which emphasised the need for emotionless, rational and expert-led forms of governance. Indeed, Lawrence (2009, p. 137) shows the late 1940s and 1950s to be a period in which the electorate was calling for politics to be about 'rational argument and instruction, rather than entertainment', charismatic leadership or rowdiness

that characterised earlier campaigning. Sober performances and rational argument were taken up by politicians and citizens reciprocated by approaching their responsibilities and participation with a new seriousness. This was the formative political context of the sample's youth and young adulthood. As such, when respondents lament a lack of contact with politicians, the standards of public debate or repetitious and superficial media coverage they are mourning the loss of a time when electoral politics was more closely aligned with idealised notions of informed, calm and rational public debate (e.g. Habermas, 1989). Times have changed, but the expectation that politics should be a realm of serious, rational debate where the best argument wins remains, for many, the yardstick against which the conduct of politics is measured.

### **Electoral choice: party convergence, declining partisanship and first past the post**

Some argue the electoral system and a politics characterised by party convergence has led to declining partisanship and turned voters off as they believe there is no real choice between the major parties – to wit New Labour's shift to the right post 1995 and David Cameron's appeal to compassionate conservatism (Curtice *et al.*, 2007). This view was widespread amongst MOP writers. While most such remarks were made during and after the 1997 election, several respondents criticised Labour's shift away from socialist policies much earlier. The comments from W632, broadly reflect others who thought there was little difference between the two major parties:

The Guardian leads on Gordon Brown keeping the Tory spending programme intact. Is he trying to out-Tory the Tories? It is not what I want to hear, that there would be no change if Labour win the election. (W632, F, 1996, Autumn/Winter Directive)

H1543 described himself as being from a working class background, but felt betrayed by a Labour Party which he thought was disconnected from the 'working man' (1987, May Special Directive) and too pro-Europe. He saw himself as 'a victim of Thatcherism' (1996, Autumn/Winter Directive), but did not believe working people would fare better with Labour. In the following remarks he argues that the legacy of Thatcherism was a Labour Party palatable to big business and Conservative voters:

Something like 50 major business people have written to the F.T. [*Financial Times*] backing Blair. In times past these people were natural supporters of the Conservative party. To me it exemplifies what a disaster 18 years of Thatcherism was. Such people did not stop voting Conservative for love of the Labour movement. (H1543, M, 2001, Spring Directive)

R470 described a similar trajectory of disaffection with Labour. He resigned from the Labour Party around 1996-97; in his words, 'when Tony Blair hi-jacked the Labour Party and I tore up my card.' (2010, Spring Directive). He viewed Labour and the Conservatives as effectively the left and right-wing of the same party.

The sense that party convergence had eroded any genuine choice at elections was compounded by the first past the post system which many respondents thought unfair, undemocratic and rendered them disenfranchised. F2218, an NHS Supplies Officer, felt particularly aggrieved at what he saw as the injustice of the electoral system. The excerpt below comes from 1992; by the time of the 2001 general election he seems to have decided not to vote. It is unclear if he returned to voting in subsequent elections.

In general terms, I have nothing but scorn for a system which effectively disenfranchises millions of citizens because of the absence of proportional representation. (F2218, M, 1992, Spring Directive)

As with many of the criticisms discussed above, for several MOP writers dissatisfaction with the electoral system was a long-standing issue. In 1987, L1504 noted that he always voted Liberal, despite feeling that his vote was 'wasted' because he lived 'in the heart of the Conservative South'. Referring to the 1983 election and the undemocratic effect of first past the post he says, 'Some 8 million of us voted last time for 22 seats!!' (L1504, 1987, May Special Directive). The Labour Party gained just 2.2 percent more votes than the Liberal/SDP Alliance, but gained 186 more seats (Butler and Kavanagh 1984). D996 made similar comments about her choice being denied by the electoral system:

If there were the slightest possibility of the Green candidate getting in I would vote for him/her (I don't even know who it is at the moment), for both head and heart are with them. (D996, F, 1987, May Special Directive)

For some respondents the electoral system left them feeling as though following their genuine choice resulted in a 'wasted' vote, while for several others the misalignment between their views and those of their constituency meant that they were always on the losing end of democracy:

In over 50 years of voting I don't recall ever electing the candidate I chose – and then politicians wonder about the low turnout. Even tactical voting – which I have done in the past – would have made no difference here, but proportional representation would certainly have done in some places I have lived in. (B2240, M, 2001, Spring Directive)

### **Concluding Remarks**

The qualitative data detailed above indicates that meeting the normative expectations of citizenship can mask long-term criticisms and deep feelings of dissatisfaction with electoral politics. Despite these high levels of disaffection, for all but one respondent choosing not to vote does not seem to have been a viable alternative; and even for F2218 this decision seems to have taken over a decade to be reached. As Coleman (2013) says of the dutiful citizens he spoke to, the act of voting is not just about feeling one has influenced the result of an election, but also about staking a claim to the public sphere. And while there is clear evidence amongst respondents of the wider decline in partisanship or party identification, in general they are more attached to political parties than younger citizens and this also helps to keep them engaged with electoral politics. In addition, unlike many younger citizens, for these MOP writers politics was largely restricted to the institutions and practices of electoral politics. As such, choosing not to vote would mean disavowing one's political capacities and rights – for them there is no alternative realm of 'life politics' (Giddens, 1991), 'sub politics' (Beck, 1994) or self-actualising citizenship.<sup>8</sup> R470 and W633 wrestled with this when they spoke of not wanting to be thought of as apathetic if they chose not to vote and of the desire for a 'none of the above' box on the ballot paper. They had serious grievances with politicians, parties and the electoral system, but they were not prepared to risk becoming or being perceived as apolitical by not voting.

While for some participants an attachment to dutiful citizenship ultimately left them feeling 'let down', betrayed or deeply dissatisfied with various aspects of electoral politics, there are powerful

reasons why they adhered to this model of citizenship. As noted above, many respondents were keenly aware of the struggle for democracy, particularly by women, leading them to highly value their vote and role as engaged citizens. Furthermore, given that several participated in the fight against fascism and others grew up in the shadow of World War II, respondents had a sense of the fragility of democracy. In addition, their political socialisation (Franklin 2004) came at a time when the norms of dutiful citizenship better aligned with the practice of electoral politics: a period of high participation, partisanship, and satisfaction with government (Denver et al 2012). Electoral campaigns were constituency-based and a newfound public desire for a politics ideally characterised by rationality and sober debate emerged. It can also be added that this form of political organisation delivered for many citizens, for example through the extension of social rights associated with the establishment of the welfare state.

While this sample of MOP writers had their citizenship norms forged in particular historical circumstances, it is the claim of this paper that their experiences and perceptions of electoral politics are likely to be shared by younger generations of dutiful citizens. Unlike these MOP writers, many younger citizens have greater access to alternative forms of citizenship and means of being political. If they find the frustrations of electoral politics too great there are alternative political repertoires and identities to explore. However, electoral politics remains the hegemonic mode of 'doing politics' in democratic societies and all of the criticisms raised by MOP writers persist and many featured prominently in the UK general election of 2015 (for example see, Ghose, 2015; Hardman, 2015; McSmith, 2015).

The dynamics of party convergence, declining turnout and partisanship, and the underlying social changes which have opened up new repertoires of political practice and a wider range of citizenship identities are central to the crisis of legitimacy facing many established democracies. The evidence presented in this paper suggests that this crisis may be deeper than often thought. The higher levels of electoral participation characteristic of dutiful citizens are likely to mask long-standing criticisms and profound dissatisfaction with an increasingly mediated, personalised and individualised politics which is often perceived as offering little choice and as disconnected from the citizens it claims to represent.

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<sup>1</sup> But see also, Popular Understandings of Politics in Britain, 1937-2015 - <http://antipolitics.soton.ac.uk/>

<sup>2</sup> See also the Qualitative Election Study of Britain - <https://gesb.info/>

<sup>3</sup> Occupations are given as listed in the MO Archive; respondents were often retired by the time of more recent submissions.

<sup>4</sup> Two women respondents felt voting was a very private matter and did not disclose their preferences in responses. In the words of journalist W633 '[...] as it is a secret ballot, I treat it as such and not even my husband knows how I vote. I don't ask him how he votes.' (W633, F, 2010, Spring Directive).

<sup>5</sup> But see the new Mass Observation Project Database - <http://database.massobs.org.uk/>

<sup>6</sup> The alphanumeric number is the identifier given to each Observer by the Archive. The year refers to the year the Directive was issued, not necessarily the year in which events described occurred – e.g. the directive to keep an election diary for the 1997 election was issued late in 1996, hence much of the commentary refers to events in 1997.

<sup>7</sup> Space does not permit further discussion but respondents were also critical of the standards of MPs behaviour in general. Many feeling politicians were generally self-serving, untrustworthy and false.

<sup>8</sup> There is some evidence to suggest that young people combine the norms of dutiful and self-actualising citizenship (e.g. Loader et al. 2015), but older citizens are much less likely to do so (e.g. Dalton 2009).