



## Changing spaces of political encounter and the rise of anti-politics: Evidence from Mass Observation's General Election diaries



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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 22 June 2016

Received in revised form

5 October 2016

Accepted 24 October 2016

#### Keywords:

Politics

Anti-politics

Elections

United Kingdom

Mass Observation

### ABSTRACT

Negativity towards the institutions of formal politics is currently a concern across much of the democratic world. It is generally agreed that such negativity increased among British citizens during the second half of the twentieth century. In this paper, we analyse a novel dataset not previously used to study this topic: Mass Observation's General Election diaries. Since diarists wrote mostly about politicians, political campaigns, and associated media coverage, we ask specifically what the diaries can tell us about increased negativity towards politicians and its relationship to developments in political communication. We take a postholing approach to sampling of the diaries, enabling comparative-static analysis between the middle and end of the twentieth century. We view the diaries in a geographical framework derived from contextual theories of social action. This gives us a focus on spaces of political encounter, modes of political interaction, performances by politicians, and judgements by citizens. We argue that prominent spaces of political encounter changed over the period from long radio speeches and rowdy political meetings to televised debates and associated expert commentary. We demonstrate how these latter settings for political interaction afforded less opportunity for politicians to perform virtues to citizens, and for citizens to calibrate judgements of politicians.

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### Introduction

'Anti-politics' has been used to describe many things, one of which is citizens' negativity towards the institutions of formal politics (Clarke, 2015). This negativity can be observed – or heard – in talk data from interviews and focus groups, or, more indirectly, in survey data on things like confidence, trust, approval, and satisfaction with such institutions. This negativity should be disaggregated by 'object of political support' (Norris, 1999; following Easton, 1965). Citizens may feel disaffection towards politicians, or parties, or parliament, or government. Scholars have identified anti-politics as an important phenomenon of the current period in parts of Europe, North America, Australasia, and elsewhere (e.g. Boswell & Corbett, 2015; McDowell, Rootham, & Hardgrove, 2014; Saunders, 2014). We need to understand more about where this phenomenon came from.

It is widely accepted that anti-politics became more prevalent in

many democracies during the second half of the twentieth century (Dalton, 2004; Norris, 1999; Nye, Zelikow, & King, 1997; Pharr and Putnam 2000; Torcal & Montero, 2006). For countries like Britain, this was a period of transformation from a time of relative political support immediately after the Second World War to a time of relative political disaffection since the late twentieth century (Stoker, 2016).

It is also widely accepted that such a long-term and complex historical development is likely to be explained by multiple factors. Citizens changed during this period. They became wealthier, better educated, and more critical (Inglehart, 1997; Norris, 1999); less aligned to the main parties (Dalton and Wattenberg 2000); and more consumerist in their approach to politics (Stoker, 2006). Politics also changed. Over the period, governments performed less well against an expanded set of criteria (Mulgan, 1994). Power was distributed away from national governments and towards other actors (Hay, 2007). Politicians and parties became less distinguishable in ideological terms (ibid). Finally, political communication changed. Politics became increasingly mediated and journalists increasingly framed politics in negative terms (Cappella & Hall Jamieson, 1997). Political campaigning became nationalised,

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professionalised, and increasingly focused on controlled situations (Lawrence, 2009).

In a global study, Norris (2011) tested such ‘demand-side’, ‘supply-side’, and ‘intermediary’ factors, and found that all of them, to some extent, help to explain patterns of political support (or, more accurately, the withdrawal of political support). The current challenge, therefore, is not so much to sort these explanations further – though productive debate continues on this point (see Baldini, 2015; Marsh, Vines, & Halupka, 2016; Richards & Smith, 2015) – as to understand more about each factor and how it works.

In this paper, we analyse General Election diaries kept by volunteer writers for Mass Observation (MO). During the period in question – what we might call the ‘long’ second half of the twentieth century, from the end of the Second World War, through the post-war period, through the late twentieth century, to the attacks of 11 September 2001 – such diaries were kept on three occasions: 1945, 1987, and 2001. We argue that such diaries help us to understand more about *anti-politician* sentiment in Britain (since most of the writing in the diaries is about politicians, as opposed to the other institutions of formal politics) and its *political communication* explanations (since most of the writing in the diaries is about how citizens’ received political campaigning and associated media coverage during the period). In doing so, these diaries help us to answer Corbett’s (2014, 2015) call for more research on anti-politician sentiment and particularly its history, including questions of continuity and change.

We draw on geographical insights from contextual theories of social action (Thrift, 1983, 1996) to argue that settings or locales in which politicians and citizens encounter one another – ‘spaces of political encounter’ – are important for the kinds of political interaction they shape and the kinds of performances by politicians and judgements by citizens they afford. We argue that prominent spaces of political encounter changed during the second half of the twentieth century. Long radio speeches and rowdy political meetings became less prominent. Televised debates and media reporting of polling results and expert analysis became more prominent. The strength of the MO diaries is that we can see in them how such changed spaces of political encounter were related to changes in modes of political interaction, performances by politicians, and judgements by citizens (including a move to more negative judgements regarding politicians).

In making these arguments, we aim to supplement existing studies of electoral geography. We study the relationship of political campaigning not to voting for particular parties (e.g. Cutts, Webber, Widdop, Johnston, & Pattie, 2014; Johnston, Pattie, Scully, & Cutts, 2016), nor to voter turnout (e.g. Fisher, Fieldhouse, Johnston, Pattie, & Cutts, 2016), but to judgements of politicians in general (as one object of political support). We also study this relationship not for the current period, during which constituency campaigning has made something of a return, but for the second half of the twentieth century – that long period of increase for anti-politics in Britain, and a period characterised by the nationalisation of political campaigning.

We return to this literature, the current period, and the question of constituency campaigning in the concluding section of the paper. But let us clarify our main argument at this point. We argue that prominent spaces of political encounter changed between the immediate post-war period and the late twentieth century. A part of this argument is that political campaigning became nationalised. Local political meetings became less prominent. National media campaigns and associated coverage became more prominent. But this is not the full argument. After all, a prominent space of political encounter in the earlier period was the speech on BBC radio. Our argument is more that political interaction became increasingly mediated and indirect during the second half of the twentieth

century. Rowdy political meetings allowed citizens to challenge politicians directly. Radio speeches may not have allowed this, but let politicians speak relatively directly to citizens for quite some time – in a way that exposed them and their programmes, and so challenged politicians in a different way. By contrast, televised debates at the end of the century involved questions and interruptions by journalists and other politicians, so that politicians would usually only have to speak for a short period of time and could get away with avoiding topics or not answering questions. Associated media coverage now also gave less voice to politicians and citizens, and more to journalists, pollsters, and expert analysts.

In making these arguments, we also seek a contribution to the revitalisation of electoral geography (Leib & Warf, 2011). We contribute more social theory by our engagement with contextual theories of social action. We contribute a conceptualisation of space as context, setting, situation, locale. We contribute a new qualitative dataset: MO’s General Election diaries. We contribute a new topic of concern through our focus on the geography of political campaigning as it relates to anti-politics (as opposed to, say, electoral success). Finally, we contribute a post-positivist form of argumentation that works towards empirical plausibility – as opposed to proof – by demonstrating ‘logical connections among phenomena which can be described concretely’ (Sennett, 1977, p. 43). We discuss this approach further below. But first, we review and extend the relevant literature on political communication and interaction.

### Political communication, political interaction, and spaces of political encounter

As we have seen, the rise of anti-politics describes a long-term development and complex problem likely to be explained by many interconnected factors. Some of these factors have been termed political-communication or intermediary factors. Research in this field has focused on how politics became increasingly mediated during the second half of the twentieth century, how media came to frame politics in negative ways, and how this framing came to have negative effects on political support among citizens (e.g. Cappella & Hall Jamieson, 1997). Alternatively, research has focused on how political campaigning became modernised during this period (e.g. Rosenbaum, 1997). In a context of limited candidate spending, the expanded franchise, and changing media, political campaigning moved from the local to the national scale; from uncontrolled meetings to controlled press conferences, rallies, and photo opportunities; and from a focus on party platforms to a focus on personalities (especially party leaders). Political campaigning became professionalised and dependent on polling, marketing, advertising, and public relations. As such, it became more negative (because ‘knocking copy’ has been shown by these professionals to work), more focused on agenda-setting (with certain issues purposefully avoided), and more targeted on floating voters in marginal seats (to the exclusion of other voters).

The close relationship between these two sets of developments – in media coverage of politics and political campaigning by parties – is captured by the concepts of mediatisation (see Strömback, 2008) and political communication (see Blumler & Kavanagh, 1999). Media became the most important source of political information for citizens (the mediation of politics). Then media developed their own commercial logic (simplification, polarisation, personalisation, visualisation etc.). Then political actors began adapting to this media logic (often reluctantly at first). Then political actors internalised this media logic – for example, by valuing policies in terms of their newsworthiness and potential for explanation and justification within media formats. The result was movement from a party-dominated political communication

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