

POLITICS & GOVERNANCE



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STATE OF INDEPENDENCE

*Martin Ince looks at the 2014 referendum on
Scottish independence and the many issues
it raises for the people of Scotland and England ›*

Last summer, the nation marvelled at Team GB's success at the Olympics. When the games get going in Rio in 2016, will the GB still exist to send a team? The Scottish National Party hopes not. It is the prime mover behind a referendum in 2014 at which the people of Scotland will be offered the chance to end three centuries of the union. But ESRC-supported research suggests that things are not quite as simple as a straightforward vote on independence might suggest.

Professor Charlie Jeffery, Vice Principal of the University of Edinburgh and former director of the ESRC devolution programme, stresses that people like the devolution that has taken place within the UK in recent years. It is popular in Scotland and even Wales, where the 1997 vote for devolution was won by a margin of just 0.3 per cent. In both countries, people want more devolution, not less. It is inconceivable that either nation would accept any dilution of the powers it has gained since 1997.

However, there is a big difference between devolution and a complete split with the rest of the UK. Paul Whiteley, Professor of Government at the University of Essex, points out that in Wales there is broad support for more devolution but much less enthusiasm for independence. In Northern Ireland, the economic collapse of the Republic has made the idea of a united Ireland unappealing even to nationalists. They accept the reality of highly-devolved, multi-party government, alongside increased north-south co-operation.

DRAWING BACK FROM THE MAX

Long negotiations between UK Prime Minister David Cameron and Alex Salmond, First Minister of Scotland and leader of the SNP, have resulted in an agreement to put a simple question to the voters: do they want Scotland to become independent, or remain within the UK? Salmond had also wanted an alternative proposal under which Scotland would take full fiscal responsibility. Scotland would raise taxes to pay for all its activities and would buy into a range of UK-wide services such as defence, overseas representation and perhaps common levels of social security. This is known in the jargon as Devo Max. There is also another option, Devo Plus, promoted by the think-tank Reform Scotland, which would involve the Scottish Parliament levying taxes for all the money it spends – about 60 per cent of total government outlays in Scotland.

By contrast, Cameron's Conservatives, and the other London-based, Britain-wide parties, oppose independence and were keen to avoid offering voters an easier second option, which, the polls suggest, would have been popular. Now

the choice is going to be much more stark. Professor Jeffery points to polling data that shows that full independence is not popular, but increased devolution is attractive to about two-thirds of the voters. Jeffery thinks that it will be tough for the SNP to win a yes vote for full independence. He says: "While there is a theoretical economic case that Scotland could use the economic levers of an independent state to

greater effect than devolved powers constrained by London's priorities, the present economic problems are likely to make voters cautious." Professor Whiteley adds that Iceland and Ireland are hideous warnings of the dangers facing small countries in the modern world.

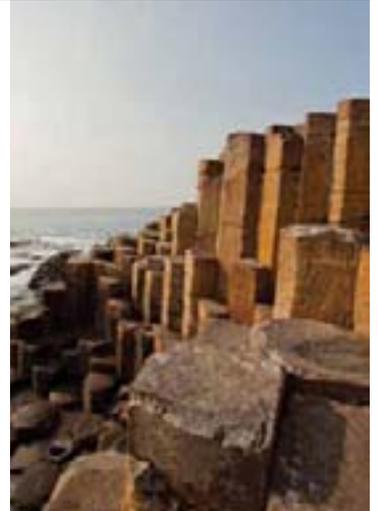
In addition, creating new states out of countries that have been united for centuries would pose its own problems. Professor Jeffery says that while NATO would be keen to have Scotland as a member, given its long military history, there is opposition to NATO membership within the SNP because of NATO's nuclear policies. Likewise, while the EU would probably welcome Scotland as a member, it is unclear whether it would belong automatically as a successor state to the

UK. It might have to apply anew, which would become a problem because applicant states have to show they are preparing to join the Eurozone and the Schengen no-passport zone. If Scotland joined Schengen and England did not, there would need to be border controls and passport checks, an inconceivable prospect for Salmond. Even more intriguing is the suggestion that the rest of the UK might also have to apply to join the EU as a new member state.

But Professor Jeffery adds that the distinction between full independence and further devolution might be slight.

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EVEN AN
INDEPENDENT
SCOTLAND
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WANT TO
SHARE SOME
SERVICES
FROM LONDON





“Even an independent Scotland would want to share some services from London,” he says, “such as the pound and the currency policy that surrounds it. It would also retain the Queen as head of state.” Because the SNP has committed itself to keeping sterling, Scotland’s Finance Minister John Swinney has said that an independent Scotland would need continuing links to the Bank of England. Scotland would be responsible fiscally to the Bank as its lender of last resort, says Professor Jeffery. He adds that there have been no helpful signs from London about how this might work, because the UK government has no interest in making Scottish independence look feasible.

But Professors Jeffery and Whiteley agree that enhanced devolution and full independence are not just a matter for Scotland. Either would mean important effects for England. Jeffery is a member of the Mackay Commission on the effects of devolution on the House of Commons. He anticipates reaching a point at which the Commons becomes mainly an English legislature. Its members from Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland would have a much-reduced role, even if independence does not remove some of them completely.

He says that an English-oriented House of Commons would force political parties to develop distinctively English policies. Divergence in service provision is already apparent in higher education and other services. Most of the initiatives to do with the marketisation of the National Health Service have taken place in England, as has much of the recent experimentation with new types of school. The devolved administrations have rejected most of these types of change.

A MORE DISTINCT ENGLAND

“These developments make the big issues for England clearer. Who are the English and what do they want?” says Jeffery. “England is becoming more of a distinct political unit, even without a formal representative body. The Westminster Parliament is bound to reflect that increasingly. One example is the government’s list of proposed legislation for the coming parliamentary session. For the first time, it specified the territorial extent of each bill, telling you

whether it covers England, the whole of the UK, or some other area.”

Paul Whiteley agrees that devolution has already changed British politics for the better. He feels strongly that before 1997, the UK had become too centralised to be a healthy democracy. “The popularity of devolution in Wales and Scotland shows that it is better for politics when people can run their own affairs,” he says. In his view, devolution and localism are part of the answer to the dwindling public interest in politics. He explains: “Westminster and Whitehall cannot leave things alone, even when all the research shows that central direction does not work. Then when things go wrong, the tendency is to impose even more central control.”

Like Charlie Jeffery, Paul Whiteley sees little future in the idea of devolution to English regions. He says that nobody identifies with these amorphous areas on the map. Instead, he favours reviving traditional local government at the level of towns, cities and counties, giving them back the high degree of autonomy that they enjoyed before the creeping centralisation of recent decades. It remains to be seen whether there would be some remaining national standards, perhaps for NHS service delivery.

“That would mean allowing local government to be innovative and have ideas,” he says. “Then you could imagine having an English Parliament, making the House of Commons more or less redundant except for dealing with foreign policy. It would only be necessary to discuss anything on a national scale if we planned another war. And you certainly would not need the present elaborate structure with the House of Lords as well as the Commons.” ■

Martin Ince is principal of Martin Ince Communications. He is a freelance science writer, media adviser and media trainer

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HOW WILL
DEVOLUTION
AFFECT SCOTLAND'S
IDENTITY?
LEFT ALEX
SALMOND, FIRST
MINISTER OF
SCOTLAND, HAS
LONG BEEN A
CHAMPION FOR
AN INDEPENDENT
SCOTLAND
**ABOVE, CLOCKWISE
FROM TOP LEFT**
ICONIC SYMBOLS
OF THE UNITED
KINGDOM'S
CONSTITUENT
COUNTRIES:
WALES, SCOTLAND
AND NORTHERN
IRELAND, WHERE
SUPPORT FOR
DEVOLUTION
IS MIXED



PROFESSOR PAUL WHITELEY
 Head of Government Department, University of Essex. He has just been elected as a Fellow of the British Academy in recognition of his contribution to social sciences

OPINION: COALITION

UNEASY BEDFELLOWS

Professor Paul Whiteley assesses the popularity of the coalition parties and predicts what might happen to the partnership before the next election

The failure of the AV referendum and attempts to reform the House of Lords have heightened tensions between the coalition partners



The Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition was always a shotgun marriage produced by the hung Parliament arising from the 2010 general election. Had the numbers added up it seems likely that the Liberal Democrats would have gone into coalition with Labour rather than the Conservatives, but that was not to be. So the first formal coalition government in Britain since World War II emerged in May 2010 after an inconclusive general election, and it included two parties with rather different policy goals and sources of support.

The Coalition Agreement provided a roadmap for this exercise and it centred around a narrative that argued that Britain needed a strong government that could deal with the economic crisis – this was a popular message at the time. A survey for the British Election Study (BES) showed that in June 2010, 41 per cent of respondents thought that the Conservatives were the best party for handling the economy, and a further 11 per cent thought that this was the Liberal Democrats. Only 23 per cent of respondents in the survey thought that Labour was the best party.

If we move forward two years to June 2012, the picture looks very different. In that month



THE BIG CHANGE HAS BEEN IN THE NUMBERS THINKING THAT NO PARTY CAN HANDLE THE PRESENT ECONOMIC PROBLEMS

30 per cent thought that the Conservatives were the best party, and only 4.5 per cent thought it was the Liberal Democrats, with 26 per cent choosing Labour. Clearly the coalition parties have lost a lot of economic credibility over this period, but Labour has not gained very much. The big change has been in the numbers thinking that no party can handle the present economic problems. This went

from just under ten per cent in June 2010 to 25 per cent in June 2012. The voters are losing confidence in all of the major parties.

One of the unexpected effects of the creation of the coalition government was the rapid loss of support for the Liberal Democrats. The party obtained 23 per cent of the vote in the 2010 general election, but by December of that year this had halved to 12.5 per cent in voting intentions measured in another BES survey. Currently, support for the Liberal Democrats is running at about ten per cent in the polls. This rapid decline arose from the perception that the party had changed its policies a great deal more than its coalition partner. This was true for cuts in public spending, student fees and the laying off of public sector workers. The latter was particularly problematic for the party as it received a much larger percentage of its support from public sector workers than the Conservatives.

BREAKING UP IS HARD TO DO

This brings us to the issue of the future of the coalition. It all turns on whether or not the Liberal Democrats break with the Conservatives before May 2015 – the agreed date for the next election. The failure of the AV referendum vote in 2011, and more recently the attempts

NEW HOUSING

House proud

Is anyone committed to sustainable development any more?

to reform the House of Lords, have destroyed two key policies that Liberal Democrats badly wanted. Criticisms that these policies are irrelevant for most people are true, but they miss the point. The policies are totemic and designed to show that the party exercises real power in government by making the Conservatives do things that they otherwise would not do. Now that both are lost, the party looks more and more like a hostage in a government intent on pursuing austerity policies into the indefinite future and coalition has become more fractious.

The obvious dilemma for the Liberal Democrats is that if they break up the coalition early in order to distance themselves from an unpopular government, that could hasten a general election in which they are likely to lose more than half their seats. The alternative is to wait for the 2015 election and hope that things get better. Both are unattractive alternatives, but there may be a good reason for them to stay in government rather than to try and rebuild support from outside.

The widespread discontent about the failure of austerity policies is increasingly focusing on George Osborne and David Cameron. The Chancellor's authority in particular is rapidly eroding both within the country and, more to the point, within the Conservative party. With Labour currently 11 per cent ahead in voting intentions in the polls, but with that party's inability to sell an alternative economic policy to the electorate, the Liberal Democrats have an opportunity.

CONVINCING ALTERNATIVES

Vince Cable has been trying to articulate a neo-Keynesian alternative strategy based on public spending and investment in infrastructure. If the Liberal Democrats in future set out a manifesto based on this approach that clearly breaks with austerity politics, the government may well be forced to concede as the pressure from its backbenchers, fearful for their seats, increases.

In effect the party has to be both in opposition and in government at the same time. This opportunity arises because the original coalition economic strategy is in ruins, and, if continued, promises yet more years of stagnation culminating in an electoral disaster. So the future of the coalition turns on whether or not Labour or the Liberal Democrats can best articulate a convincing alternative to the present policies. If Labour succeeds in doing so then the coalition will stagger on until 2015 to be replaced by a Labour government with a large majority. If the Liberal Democrats succeed and the economy starts to recover they will be able to claim the credit and rebuild their electoral support. ■

www.essex.ac.uk/bes

SHORTAGES OF HOUSING and spiralling house prices led the previous government to set targets for houses to be built in each English region. Growth areas were identified in the South East of England. It was argued that without more housing in the South East to underpin growth, national prosperity was threatened. Milton Keynes and the South Midlands (MKSM) was one of the most important of the growth areas, with a projection that up to 120,000 new homes should be built between 2001-2021.

'Sustainability' was also a much-publicised objective. 'Sustainable communities' were to be created through better urban design (including low-carbon buildings), community-based planning and improved public transport. The promise of sustainable development was one that brought together jobs, good-quality housing and the prospect of balanced communities. This was a promise both for existing residents (who might feel threatened by the arrival of new development) and for future residents (who would be able to take advantage of the amenities being provided).

SHIFTING TARGETS

Since 2010 the debate has shifted, partly as a result of the sharp slowdown in the housing market (so house builders have little incentive to build large numbers of new properties), and partly because the coalition government has scrapped central housing targets, reduced capital investment in infrastructure, and given more power to communities and local authorities to decide whether new housing should be built in their areas, and whether it is to be built to sustainability standards.

Research under way by Professor Allan Cochrane at the Open University and Dr Bob Colenutt at the University of Northampton examines the ongoing local tensions around new housing growth, why some areas find it acceptable and some do not, and whether there remains a commitment to sustainable development. Using the Milton Keynes/Northamptonshire area as the laboratory, the project traces the views of local authorities and communities during the housing boom and during the current recession.

Initial findings confirm that under the previous government local authorities struggled to manage pressures for growth and did not have the levers (infrastructure funding or powers)

to negotiate effectively with landowners and house-builders. One of the main criticisms emerging from communities and local authorities was that growth was 'housing-led' not 'infrastructure-led' – ie, that housing came without a guarantee of provision for schools, roads and community facilities to make growth sustainable (or 'palatable' as one senior planning officer put it).

The government believed that the market would deliver sustainable growth and the special 'Growth Areas' fund was as a consequence very limited.

There was a lack of clarity about what sustainable housing development meant in practice (one officer described sustainability guidance as 'tokenistic') and indicated a lack of skills or leverage in dealing with developer pressures.

In a few cases there was political opposition to housing targets. One of the local authorities told researchers it 'went into battle' when the housing figures were announced by the government in their plans for MKSM. On the other hand, a prominent community group commented that local authorities were 'weak' in the face of development pressures.

The housing slow down has enabled some local authorities to lower their own projections and allowed them to put their own development plans in place. But the deepening recession has also increasingly meant that the requirements for affordable housing and other community benefits have been loosened. The meaning of and possibilities for sustainable development remain uncertain.

The research will next focus on attempts to develop a realistic strategic vision for sustainable growth, as well as seeking to identify the levers that will enable local authorities and communities to negotiate effectively with developers and landowners. ■

www.open.ac.uk

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THE MEANING
OF AND
POSSIBILITIES
FOR
SUSTAINABLE
DEVELOPMENT
REMAIN
UNCERTAIN



GETTY

ONLINE TECHNOLOGY

POWER TO THE PEOPLE

Social media mobilise existing political support but do little to engage unenthusiastic young people

RESEARCHERS HAVE SOUGHT to understand how the internet is changing politics ever since the World Wide Web burst on to our computer screens in the early 1990s. A research project by Marta Cantijoch and Rachel Gibson at the University of Manchester is looking at this question from the perspective of both political elites (parties and candidates) and voters in the context of an election campaign.

The central proposition being investigated is whether the internet is helping to revive the fortunes of political parties by allowing them to become more porous, networked structures that are open to more citizen direction and involvement in their campaigns.

At the same time, are digital technologies – and particularly social media tools like Facebook and Twitter – helping to create more proactive citizens who practise and consume politics in a more independent manner, relying less and less on formal channels of input, and becoming more self-directing?

The research has been conducted in three different national elections since 2010 – the UK, Australia and France – with the remaining study of the US presidential election to conclude later this year. The results produced so far don't suggest that the internet is revolutionising political systems but do indicate a number of important trends.

A NEW KIND OF CAMPAIGN

First, digital technology does appear to be moving parties toward a new style of collaborative campaigning where specialist websites and tools are provided for supporters to undertake certain key tasks such as 'getting out the

vote' – previously the core responsibility of campaign staff, and managed centrally. While this 'open-source' approach to campaigning has been most prominent and successfully practised in the US and was arguably 'perfected' by Obama in 2008, it does appear to be emerging closer to home.

In 2010 several parties in the UK ran 'in-house' social network sites to recruit digital activists to help them in their campaign. Labour and the Liberal Democrats, arguably the financial underdogs compared with the Conservatives, were most enthusiastic, suggesting that this grassroots approach may be a product of expediency as much as a desire to deepen their democratic ethos. Given falling rates of traditional membership, however, we expect this new form of cyber-affiliation to be something that the parties increasingly promote.

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OUTSIDE THE OFFICIAL CAMPAIGN CONTEXT, A NEW FORM OF PARTICIPATION IS EMERGING ONLINE

A second key finding has been that outside the party and official campaign context there does appear to be a new form of popular participation emerging online that is associated with younger citizens who typically have less interest and enthusiasm for politics. The researchers identify this mode of engagement as 'e-expressive'. It centres on the posting or sharing of one's political opinion on informal social media spaces such as blogs, twitter and social network sites. While one might be tempted to see it as simply an online form of political discussion, its public and viral quality gives it a more deliberate and consequential quality than the more casual or 'watercooler' type of political conversation.

GETTING ENGAGED

The consequences of this new form of engagement are perhaps even more interesting: while other types of online engagement during the campaign – such as gathering news and information – were linked to an increased likelihood of voting, this e-expressive mode was not. This suggests that while this new option for involvement in politics might be appealing to those who are typically less likely to participate, its informal nature may mean that it does not trigger any interest in engaging via official representative channels.

Joining the two findings together, it seems that perhaps despite the best efforts of political parties to harness digital technology to improve their fortunes, ultimately they will have to stand and watch from the sidelines while it fosters growth of the informal sector in politics. ■

www.humanities.manchester.ac.uk
twitter.com/BarackObama





Left to right, Slovakian Prime Minister Robert Fico, Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk, Czech Prime Minister Petr Necas and Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban in June 2012 – all but Orban head coalition governments

➤ EASTERN EUROPE

Competition versus co-operation

There was surprise when Britain formed its first coalition government in 70 years in 2010, but elsewhere in Europe this type of government is common

THE QUESTION OF 'who governs?' often brings the reply: 'the party that wins the election'. But in many countries it is more complex. Across most of Europe, elections are held under systems of proportional representation that rarely result in a single party acquiring a majority of seats in Parliament. Instead, parties must build coalitions to ensure that they have a secure majority in the legislature, which is required to ensure policies can be enacted. But why do some parties form coalitions while other viable options wallow in opposition? New research by Dr Lee Savage of King's College London considers this question in the context of recently democratised states.

There is a large body of work that has looked at the potential determinants of coalition formation in West European democracies. The key determinants of coalition formation in these countries have been found to be numerical size (parties tend to form governments that hold a majority in Parliament) and ideological cohesiveness. The latter ensures that parties in a government have some degree of overlap – or at least a minimal level of disagreement – over the policies that government will seek to implement. This makes intuitive sense, as in competitive democracies political parties distinguish themselves from one another on the basis of their policy profiles. In this respect,

party competition for government that takes place on the basis of ideology could be said to be a sign of an established democracy.

This raises questions for newer democracies such as those of post-communist Eastern Europe. To what extent are parties in Eastern Europe characterised by the same types of behaviour observed among Western European political parties? Does party competition for government take place on the basis of ideology? And what are the implications of this for democratic politics in Eastern Europe?

EAST VERSUS WEST

These questions are particularly important in Eastern Europe as party systems differ markedly from those found in Western Europe. Party electoral support fluctuates to a greater extent from election-to-election in Eastern Europe and there is a much greater degree of turnover in party systems, with many parties disbanding and new ones forming relatively regularly. Furthermore, political parties in Eastern Europe have often been characterised as lacking a coherent ideology and policy platform, which leads many to believe they are concerned only with gaining political power and less interested in implementing a specific policy programme. Under such conditions it would be difficult for parties

to interact with one another on the basis of ideology as parties tend to in Western Europe.

The research finds that despite concerns about continuing party system flux in Eastern Europe, political parties do compete and co-operate with one another on the basis of policy and ideology. Parties are significantly more likely to become members of the government if they are ideologically closer to the party that is charged with leading the coalition formation process (otherwise known as the *formateur* party). While this would be an unremarkable finding among West European states, it is certainly important in the context of Eastern Europe for the reasons above.

KEY FACT

EU COUNTRIES RUN BY COALITION GOVERNMENTS INCLUDE POLAND, THE CZECH REPUBLIC AND SLOVAKIA

A further implication of this finding is that the type of democratic party politics that is routinely observed in Western Europe has rapidly become an important feature of the political landscape in Eastern Europe. There may be lessons that can be learned from East European states for other newly-democratising countries that are striving to build a functioning multiparty democracy. ■

www.kcl.ac.uk/artshums/depts/european_studies/people/staff/academic/savage1.asp

VOTING

A lost generation?

Politicians must reach out to strengthen young people's connection with the democratic process in Britain

Young protesters have been prominent in recent years in mass political and social actions



YOUNG PEOPLE IN BRITAIN are often characterised as politically lazy and apathetic, with no interest in taking part in the formal democratic process. This viewpoint is not new, and it is one that has vexed politicians and policymakers for many years. Indeed, there has been growing anxiety within government circles that the British public – and notably young adults – are deeply disillusioned with, and alienated from, the political process. This concern has largely been shaped by a recent decline in voting rates, with young people being particularly absent from the polls at successive general elections in 2001, 2005 and 2010.

But in the last year or so, young people have also been prominent in a series of significant mass social and political actions. Whether these were the episodes of civil unrest that swept across Britain in 2011, the more organised student-led protests against university tuition fees,

or the campaign of occupations at St Paul's Square and elsewhere, young people's interventions have been observed with increasing alarm by commentators.

New research conducted in 2011, led by Professor Matt Henn and Nick Foard at Nottingham Trent University, examines young people's attitudes towards politics and the democratic process. Based on a survey of more than 1,000 18-year-olds across Britain, as well as 14 focus groups, the results seem to challenge the popular stereotype that today's generation of young people is dismissive of political matters and lost to democracy.

LACK OF CONFIDENCE

The survey results indicate that nearly two thirds (63 per cent) of young people claimed to have some or more interest in politics. But despite this, more than half (55 per cent) of them feel considerably ill at ease in terms of their own knowledge and understanding of

British politics, with only a third (36 per cent) claiming confidence in such matters. Most worrying, today's generation of young people do not feel that they can influence the decision-making process. Only a very small minority (13 per cent) considered that there were meaningful opportunities open to them to influence the political scene, while 75 per cent claimed to lack such influence.

Despite these feelings of political powerlessness, young adults do appear to have faith in the democratic process. Nearly half of them (48 per cent) have a general confidence in the value of elections, against a third (37 per cent) who hold more sceptical views. Similarly, well over half (57 per cent) state that they are committed to the principle of voting. It would seem that this is a generation of young democrats.

The first experience of a general election in 2010 has left many feeling deeply

57%
OF THE 18-YEAR-OLDS IN THE SURVEY STATE THEY ARE COMMITTED TO THE PRINCIPLE OF VOTING

frustrated. The results from the project reveal that they consider professional politicians to be remote and self-serving, with no commitment towards championing young people's interests. The overwhelming majority (81 per cent) hold a negative view of the political classes, with very few admitting any trust in either the parties (eight per cent) or in politicians (seven per cent).

So what might be done to re-connect today's youth generation to the formal political process? The research findings reveal that politicians need to take the first step, and that young people would welcome a direct approach. But at present, they feel that politicians are rather cynical in their dealings with the public. So there is some serious public relations work needed for politicians to demonstrate that their intentions in reaching out to people – and young people in particular – are motivated by a sincere and genuine desire to listen to their voices and act upon them accordingly. ■

www.ntu.ac.uk/research/groups_centres/soc/young_people_politics.html

DATA CONTROL

A MATTER OF TRUST

Public data can inform and improve society, but we must use it wisely

THE BRITISH GOVERNMENT routinely collects a significant quantity of data that has the potential to inform policies and improve our quality of life. This sits at the heart of the government's transparency agenda, made explicit through different Open Data strategies. The effects of releasing publicly-funded data into the public domain are not yet properly understood, but the Cabinet Office's Open Data White Paper makes the case that making the data 'trustworthy' and easy to use – and then enhancing access – can provide new efficiencies in public services and help consumers make informed choices. There is also the potential for making

accountability real, and increasing visibility of policy decisions.

As more public data becomes available to researchers across sectors, Matthew Woollard, Director at UK Data Service, believes it's time to consider how we might prepare and use it to best advantage. The Royal Society's report on Science as an Open Enterprise cautions that openness is 'not an unqualified good', and points to the need for some boundaries to protect commercial value, privacy, safety and security.

MANAGING ACCESS

Making selected, high-quality, publicly created data available in usable formats, which protect the privacy of respondents, has benefits. For example, data on UK student loans might indicate the long-term impact of student loan debt on other life choices and consumption patterns. The data has already been captured – in some cases as administrative data, a by-product of government activity – so there are no additional data collection costs, distribution costs are relatively inexpensive, and thus benefits should outweigh the overall additional cost.

But there have been instances where making some data publicly available hasn't fulfilled its

promise. For example, many argue that school league tables haven't improved educational standards, and that the choice engendered by their availability is an illusion. This may be the result of using this data inappropriately or for a purpose for which they are not ideally suited; once an ideological agenda is introduced over social data there may be distorting effects. In these cases, it is not a question of making data available that causes this, rather the manner in which data is deployed.

If we are to make the most of public data we must address some crucial issues. We have to deal with some of the commonly held views against data sharing. We have to ensure that data is made available in useful formats and that there are controls against improper release and malicious misuse. The loss of data integrity must also be controlled. These tasks are not insurmountable. The ESRC's UK Data Service, launched in October 2012, explicitly provides the means to these ends with its advice and guidance on research data management and its state-of-the-art secure access facilities. ■

www.esds.ac.uk

SELECT COMMITTEES

Under scrutiny

How well do select committees perform their House of Commons scrutiny function?

THE MPS' EXPENSES scandal that rocked the political establishment in 2009 prompted considerable debate about exactly what Parliament is for and how it should be expected to work. Research undertaken by Dr Alexandra Kelso, Senior Lecturer in Politics at the University of Southampton, explores the House of Commons select committee system to better understand how these committees contribute to the broader scrutiny work undertaken by Parliament, and to performing a check on government and its actions.

Select committees are key to holding government to account, and were created in 1979 to enable Members of Parliament to develop the policy expertise that they often lacked and which frequently prevented the Commons from fulfilling its scrutiny tasks to the best of its ability. Thirty years on from their establishment, the select committees were a focus for reformers following the expenses scandal, and committee chairs are now elected

by the whole House of Commons, marking a significant change in their organisation.

Dr Kelso's work explores these organisational questions in terms of understanding how the committee members work together and with their chair, given their cross-party complexion, which is

often thought to inhibit collaboration among MPs.

For example, the research studies the evidence sessions that committees hold with government ministers, and that are often featured in the news, to explore how chairs approach their 'leadership role' during these high profile occasions to deliver incisive scrutiny. It examines whether chairs from the governing party

behave differently from opposition chairs, and seeks to identify any behavioural differences that may be a result of the introduction of elected chairs.

The research examines questions about whether the extensive work undertaken by the committees actually affects scrutiny

Select committees were created in 1979 to hold government to account



performed inside the Commons chamber. It also aims to delineate the 'scrutiny universe' that committees inhabit.

ENSURING ACCOUNTABILITY

Committees spend hours engaged in inquiries, hearing and reading evidence, publishing reports aimed at highlighting policy success and failure, and pinpointing where government could do things better. But it is unclear how much of this work is actually used by MPs who are not committee members themselves. If MPs are not making the most use of the extensive work undertaken, Parliament may not be as effective and efficient as it could be. Why should Parliament be exempt from the current drive for efficiency elsewhere in the public sector? ■

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WHY SHOULD
PARLIAMENT
BE EXEMPT
FROM THE
CURRENT
DRIVE FOR
EFFICIENCY?”

PUBLIC OPINION

FIT TO GOVERN?

Do governments take any notice of how the public views political parties on the key criterion of competence?

PARTIES NEED A reputation for competence if they are to be trusted to run the country. Research by Dr Jane Green, University of Manchester, and Dr Will Jennings, University of Southampton, reveals how public opinion about party competence changes over time, and the trigger factors that shape gains and losses in perceived competence for political parties.

The findings provide insights into the way people update views on the all-important criterion of competence; a criterion that is important at election time. Taking other explanations into account, competence accounts for up to eight per cent in fluctuations in party vote shares across countries and over time.

The researchers gathered thousands of opinion poll surveys over time in Britain, the US, Australia and Canada, dating as far back as 1945. They analysed the way the public rates

political parties for their competence on issues such as the economy, health care, education, crime, and so on. The media often reports public ratings of parties on individual issues, and political parties take notice of whether the public rate them positively or negatively on different policy concerns.

“PARTIES NEED A REPUTATION FOR COMPETENCE IF THEY ARE TO BE TRUSTED TO RUN THE COUNTRY”

Green and Jennings’ research revealed that public confidence about political parties increases or decreases on all policy issues alike: a major policy failure in one area doesn’t just influence perceptions on that policy; it can taint the public’s trust in a party on unrelated issues, so if a party improves its reputation on one issue it will also be trusted on a range of other policies.

Combining all the available opinion polls, the researchers calculated a competence score for each party and government over time. This score represents how the public thinks of a party as competent or incompetent in



Margaret Thatcher might have been popular in 1979 but opinions changed during her tenure

general, and it allows the researchers to answer new questions. One such question concerns the way competence declines for parties in government. A decline is common to parties in governments in different countries and time periods, but there is often a small uptick as elections approach. These trends are represented in the figure (below), showing the competence index for UK parties during periods in which they held government. The accumulation of policy delivery and politics erodes public confidence in a party in office, and few governments significantly improve their competence ratings.

PUBLIC CONCERNS

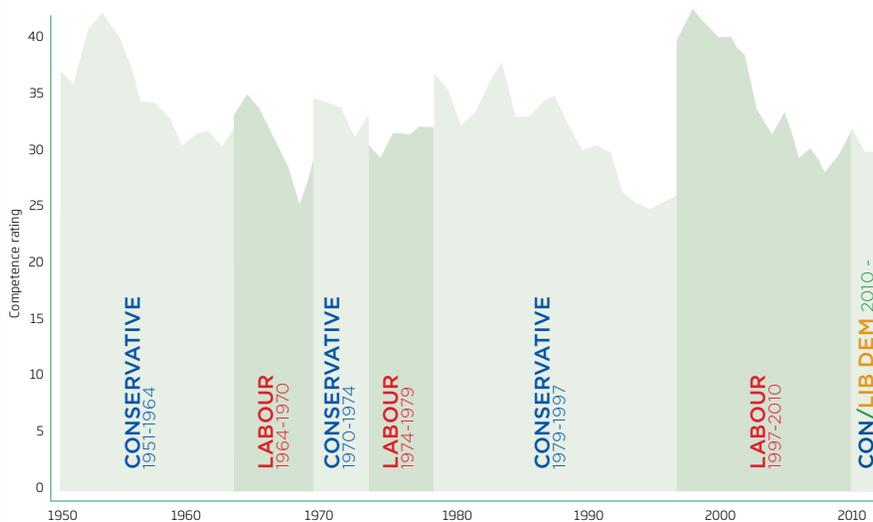
The researchers also show the implications of competence ratings on individual policies. Each party has a rank ordering of its handling of issues, from its most positive to its most negative, at any given time. Findings suggest that a party with a high ranking on an issue gives that issue more attention in the policy programme announced at the start of a Parliament, and in the legislation passed in Parliament or congress.

Public concerns also matter a great deal. These explain the issues given attention when an issue becomes high on the public agenda. Governments are responsive to the issues that matter to voters when those issues rise in salience, which is good news for the functioning of democracy.

Competence is a necessary quality of any responsible government, but researchers have known relatively little about how much the public holds parties in government to account for competence, and how those reputations for competence are gained or eroded. Now Green and Jennings’ research unpacks the importance of competence in politics across countries over time. ■

www.competence-politics.co.uk

THE COMPETENCE RATING OF GOVERNMENTS BY THE PARTY



GETTY

 SOCIAL CONTRACTS

You scratch my back, I might scratch yours...

What is the difference between successful and unsuccessful social contracts in a democratic society?

WHAT DO THE FOLLOWING have in common: the European Union's fiscal compact, the moral basis for the welfare state, the willingness of political parties to put in place rules on the conduct of political campaigns, and commitment to action on global climate change? The answer is that they can all be understood as social contracts, agreements among agents to co-operate with one another for their common good.

Research by Professor Albert Weale, ESRC Professorial Fellow and Professor of Political Theory and Public Policy at UCL, examines social contracts. His work shows that some common

features of social life demonstrate the need for social contracts. If there is a drought, we are all better off if each of us saves water. But each person can try to let themselves off the hook by saying their contribution will not make any difference. If everyone says this, the reasoning becomes self-defeating. The cumulative effect of every person using water freely is that no one has enough. So it is with climate change, the payment of contributions for social protection in the welfare state, or the willingness of political parties to keep to the rules on campaigning.

Sometimes social contracts are explicit, taking the form of legal agreements among

participants, as with international treaties on climate change. Sometimes social contracts are implicit, as when a group of friends take it in turn to be designated driver so that others can drink.

The idea that social relations can be understood as a social contract goes back at least 2,500 years to some of the classical Greek thinkers of ancient Athens. But it is only in recent years that social science has started to explain what makes some social contracts successful and others unsuccessful. One crucial condition for

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CONTRACTING PARTIES MUST BE ABLE TO MAKE A CREDIBLE COMMITMENT TO ONE ANOTHER

success is that the contracting parties, whether they are individuals or nation states, must be able to make a credible commitment to one another that they each will perform their part when necessary.

Credible commitment is especially interesting

because it involves participants in the social contract restricting their own freedom in order to gain the advantages that the social contract promises. It is no use one person just telling other people that they will restrict their water use or turn down the central heating to reduce greenhouse gases. The others must believe that the person really will do what they say for them to adjust their behaviour. The best way they can be sure is if the person commits themselves in some way, so that people can rely on their performance.

HARD-WON COMMITMENT

Such commitment is easier in some cases than others. It is easier when the participants in the social contract meet regularly, so that they can monitor one another's performance. It is also easier if the group is small rather than large.

All these difficulties are shown in the problems that the member states of the Eurozone are having in agreeing to a fiscal compact. Will Greece or Spain be able to implement the necessary budget cuts? Can spending be kept in balance? Will parliaments, courts and the electorate agree? Commitment is hard to come by.

Social contracts can be for good purposes or bad - 'honour among thieves' is a type of social contract. The social contracts that work for a democratic society are ones where as many interests as possible can have a say about the terms of the social contract and can play a part in modifying the contract as circumstances develop. This in turn requires open forums in which public deliberation can take place using the evidence that only well-crafted social science can bring. We have a long way to go before our society can say it has a social contract with which everyone can be happy. ■

www.ucl.ac.uk/spp



Would you save water to help your neighbours if there was a drought?



GERRY STOKER
Professor of Politics
and Governance at
the University of
Southampton

OPINION: ENGAGEMENT IN POLITICS

TRIGGER HAPPY PEOPLE

Professor Gerry Stoker believes that a better politics with less self-serving politicians could make more citizens more interested

There are good reasons for thinking that people might not be fixed in their interest in politics. After all, in many parts of our lives what we do and how we react is dependent on context and circumstances. Testing this prospect in terms of politics, new research has found that about half of us would shift to greater interest in politics given the right trigger, and that the young citizen in particular could be drawn into politics to a greater degree if the context for engagement changed.

Of course we do not want to appear naive; we know that politics is not everyone's favourite pastime. So under research funded by the ESRC we tested both negative and positive triggers to see their effect on people's level of interest.

The negative is based on the idea that many people do not really want to engage that much, but if politics becomes really bad - in terms of the levels of corruption by special interests or self-serving behaviour from politicians - more people would get themselves involved. The silent majority will rise up, on this line of reasoning, if the negative triggers are strong enough and kick out the rogues.

Another line of argument sees it differently, arguing that what is needed to get people involved is a positive trigger, a sense that politics could be better, less rigged and where the views of people might come to matter in a way that they do not now. In those circumstances people would be more willing to lend their interest and voice to political proceedings.

DISINTERESTED PARTIES

To test these competing ideas we asked a representative sample survey of British people two questions: If politics was more influenced by self-serving politicians and powerful special interests do you think that you would be more or less interested in getting involved in politics? And, if politics was less influenced by self-serving politicians and powerful special interests do you think that you would be more or less interested in getting involved in politics?

When sorting the answers, we first identified those whose response was the same to both questions - they stayed interested or



Do convicted MPs like Lord Hanningfield discourage people from engaging with politics?

uninterested regardless of the preamble about whether politics was more or less influenced by self-serving interests. We say they have fixed preferences in that neither positive nor negative triggers would solicit from them a higher or lower propensity to be active politically. We then distinguished between those that changed their

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YOUNGER GROUPS OF PEOPLE ARE MORE OPEN THAN OTHERS TO SHIFTING THEIR STANCE

response as a result of the negative trigger of a threat that politics would be more influenced by vested interests and those that were influenced by a positive trigger implying that politics would be less rigged and more open.

For the population as a whole we found that just over half were fixed in their preferences. But that does mean the other half could be persuaded to shift to greater interest in politics. For those that changed their response the positive trigger proved twice as powerful as the

negative trigger in stimulating a change of interest. In terms of the two explanations of interest in politics, it seems that there are more people that fit in with the idea that if only we could give the impression that politics was more open and less rigged, interest would follow.

We also discovered a noteworthy age pattern to the responses. Some six in ten of the age bracket 65-74-year-olds had fixed interest in politics compared to only just over four in ten of 18-24-year-olds. The pattern holds as you go up through the age range. Younger people are less fixed in their pattern of interest and as a result more likely than older age groups to be triggered into greater political action. But there is a potential sting in the tail. The impact of the triggers for greater engagement are more evenly matched for younger people, with both positive and negative stimuli making a difference, whereas higher up the age range it's clearly the positive trigger that is making much more of an impact.

The survey findings are encouraging for those that fear for our democracy if too many people have no interest in politics. The good news is that around half the people surveyed could become more interested in politics in the right circumstances and younger groups of people are more open than others to shifting their stance and getting involved. But the troubling issue remains and is the broader focus of future research: how could we convince people that politics is open and not dominated by self-serving politicians and special interests? ■

www.southampton.ac.uk/politics

Interest in politics by age and triggers				
Age range	Fixed interest %	Negative trigger %	Positive trigger %	Numbers in sample
18-24	44.8	24.5	30.6	245
25-34	47.1	18.2	34.7	340
35-44	52.3	16.3	31.3	294
45-54	52.6	17.7	29.7	293
55-64	51.3	11.1	37.6	271
65-74	60.3	8.2	31.5	232
75+	65.0	7.7	27.2	169
All ages	52.4	15.4	32.2	1,844

Source: Audit of Political Engagement Survey, December 2011 and January 2012 (NB: percentage figures are rounded)