

Causes of political disaffection and disengagement



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Is the British political class to blame for political disaffection and disengagement?

The Founding Fathers suggested that a democracy can only come to impartial decisions if both high levels of representation and deliberation take place (Gargarella, 1998). As a result of growing political disengagement and disaffection within contemporary British politics, there is a growing, “ focus on the quality of representative democracy in Britain and on the quality of participatory democracy” (Kelso, 2007, p365) - the relationship that has been recognised is that political disaffection and disengagement are not conducive with an impartial democracy. Worryingly, both the Hansard Society’s annual, ‘ *Audit of Political Engagement*’ (2017), and a recent House of Commons briefing paper, ‘ *Political disengagement in the UK: who is disengaged?*’ (2017), suggest that political disaffection and disengagement are growing issues; knowledge of politics is down six percent from the previous year (49%), the level of trust in Government ‘ to put the needs of the nation first’ has dropped to 17% (2013) and trust in the credibility of MPs stands at a measly 9%. These figures indicate that there is indeed an issue of disaffection and disengagement within the UK, thus, to determine if the political class or instead, something else is responsible, it becomes necessary to investigate what the cause of disengagement and disaffection is within specific subsections of the population; especially those who are more likely to become disengaged from politics - the ‘ disaffected democrats’ (Flinders, 2015). These factions include demographics such as the ‘ working class’ and ‘ 18-24 year olds’, both of which account for low levels of knowledge in politics compared to the average mentioned above; 29% and 33% respectively (Hansard Society 2017).

The term 'political class' is contentious and, 'is still not thoroughly developed in literature' (Manolov 2013). Allen & Cairney's, '*What do we mean when we talk about the "Political Class"?*' (2015), offers the best practical definition; that the term political class is used to identify certain, 'flawed characteristics', that elected politicians tend to hold, those being:

" Limited roots in local constituencies, inexperience of the real world, inability to reflect the social background of the voting population, inability to represent devolved and English regions, and their tendency to engage in a style of politics that is off-putting to the general public." (Allen & Cairney, 2015, p18)

The general view that the working class currently have of politicians is one of 'cynicism' (Manning & Homes 2012). Within a study conducted by Manning & Holmes (2012), members of the working class gave opinions on how the political class cannot represent them – one member of the survey describing David Cameron, the then PM as followed: " he's snooty... [h]e'll not really be interested in ordinary, what I class ordinary people" (Manning & Holmes, 2012, p. 483). This line of narrative makes total sense as there is no sense of 'descriptive representation' (Pitkin, 1967) for most elected MPs. For example, just 3% of MPs elected in 2015 came from an occupational background described as 'manual work' (House of Commons Library 2016), whilst the proportion of the population that lies within the social class of manual workers (DE) stands at 25% (NRS, 2016). Moreover, the annual wage for the working class sits below £20, 000 (Manning & Holmes, 2012) whilst the base annual salary of an MP starts at £76, 011 (Parliament. uk, 2017). It would be fair to say that there is a huge socio-economic disparity between

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the two classes which makes it hard for the working class to believe that they are truly represented within Parliament. This idea has been explored thoroughly in regard to the descriptive representation of women; Phillips (1995), most notably suggested that the electorate tends to favour those that are, "best equipped to represent" (Wängerud, 2009, p. 52), their views – those that can empathise directly with their electorate. Underrepresentation is an issue for a much wider demographic than just the working class. Just 8% of MPs identify as BME (British Future, 2017) whilst the population of BME citizens in the UK stands at 13% (Census, 2011). Furthermore, just 2% of MPs are under the age of 30 (Total Politics, 2016) whereas those who are of voting age under 30 make up 8.4% (Census, 2011). As the political class is not representative of the working class, or if it fails to represent minorities proportionally, there is no sense of, 'impartiality', within the representative process (Gargarella, 1998), resulting in political disaffection and potentially even disengagement.

Whilst Pinkleton & Austin (2004) suggest that political disaffection leads to political disengagement, in evaluation, there is evidence to suggest that although disaffection is significant within the UK, the same cannot be said for political disengagement. Flinders (2015) argues that the current political climate is not, 'anti-political' – that is it is not in favour of disengaging from politics – but that it is, 'anti-establishment' – disaffected from contemporary politics and the nature of the institution of the political class. Whilst statistics previously mentioned indicate that the levels of political knowledge within the working class are relatively low (29% vs. social class AB returning 71%), voter turnout in the 2017 General Election is only slightly lower than the

highest ranking social class; DE's 61% in comparison to AB's 73% (IPSOS Mori, 2017). This would then indicate that even though the working class feels disaffection towards politics, they remain involved in the political process. This seems to be the case more generally; more and more people are involving themselves in politics. Party membership numbers are ever increasing with the Labour party holding a 38 year high of 552, 000 members (June 2017) and the Liberal Democrats a 24 year high of 102, 000 (June 2017) (House of Commons Library, 2018). The logical question therefore; why is this the case amongst the working class and society in general?

Birch (2016) reiterates the assumption that the [re]mobilisation of certain cleavages within politics indicates that a, " new issue has galvanised a previously political quiescent sector of the population"(p. 107). This is reflected in the 2015 YouGov analysis of the General Election in which, the data within the social class ' DE' shows a shift away from the Conservatives (a vote share of 29%, their lowest amongst any social class) and one towards the alternatives of Labour and UKIP (37% and 18% respectively). A vote for Labour, whilst not as obviously as a vote for UKIP, could still very well be a vote against the political class. Mills (1958) specification of the political class as the, ' political directorate', places greater influence on the role of Cabinet above both Government and naturally Parliament. Following Mills' terminology, a vote against the, ' political directorate', would be any party that would topple the current Cabinet. Thus, as Labour offer the most immediate alternative to the, ' political directorate', in a UK that is converging upon a two-party system (Prosser, 2018), a vote for them could

also be interpreted as a rejection of the current political class; proof of political disaffection but not of disengagement.

A stronger argument for disaffection being the fault of the political class would be the rise in support for UKIP. Nigel Farage, former leader and ardent supporter of UKIP, ran on a campaign revolving around the political class, 'selling us out', due to them being, 'career politicians' (GE 2015 & Brexit referendum 2017), drawing a clear line between the electorate and, 'them', (the political class). As well as furthering the argument of a lack of descriptive representation causing political disaffection, Farage's campaign platform highlights an issue Crouch outlined in *Post-Democracy* (2004); career politicians are, "more concerned with meeting the needs of big business rather than ordinary citizens" (Jennings et al., 2016, p. 880). This concept is reinforced by a survey carried out by Jennings et al, which reports that 78% of social classes C2DE believe politicians to be 'self-serving'. This in tandem with the rise in votes for other parties, gives evidence of a growing cleavage against the political class, which although has prevented political disengagement from becoming a widespread issue amongst the working class, has cemented political disaffection within society.

However, in evaluation, whilst political disaffection is self-evident, there is a systemic issue which enables the political class to unjustly receive much of the criticism. Flinders (2014, p. 3) draws attention to the 1975 report, *The Crisis of Democracy*, which suggests that, "the demands on democratic government grow, while the capacity of democratic government stagnates".

The concept Flinders then explores in the same article is one of an, 'expectation gap', and, in another article, joined by Kelso, he goes on to

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assert that the contemporary system of Government, ' encourages politicians to promise standards of behaviour ... that are unrealistic and unattainable' (2011). Thus, when these, ' unattainable', promises are not kept, the result is one of disaffection as the electorate feels let down. Looking through the lens of game theory, it becomes clear as to why this is a systemic issue within contemporary UK politics. Whilst competing politicians both offer the most out of reach promises, any attempt to reduce the expectation gap by lowering the quality of promises will yield less votes, as to the electorate, the other candidates yields them a better payoff. Thus, the current scenario remains in a Nash equilibrium in which both candidates will offer a high level of promises in detriment to the expectation gap. Whilst it could be argued that the political class is at fault for offering unreasonable promises in the first places, it is to an extent only as a result of the nature of the contemporary electoral system.

It can also be argued that political disaffection and disengagement are both contributed to by external factors, as opposed to just the political class. One of those external factors would be the influence of social media. Whilst this applies more to the younger generations within the electorate, the effects of social media in creating political disaffection are considerable. Yanamoto et al. (2017) report of ever increasing, ' attack advertising', and, ' negative media coverage', which perhaps foreshadowed the investigation into the activities of Cambridge Analytica (Channel 4 News, 2018). CA was more notoriously active in the Trump presidential election yet played apart in the 2016 Brexit referendum. Although there has been no leak of the explicit role CA played in the Brexit campaign, going off track record of its campaign

defining 'crooked Hilary' slogan it developed from US Facebook data, it would be fair to suggest that the firm played a part in inflating political disaffection felt by the UK electorate. Even if CA was not directly involved, it cannot be denied that websites such as twitter, facebook and YouTube give individuals and entities a platform to spread cynicism and a rhetoric in favour of political disaffection. As suggested in Flinders (2015) individuals such as Owen Jones and Russel Brand played, 'major roles', in promoting a, 'different form of politics', engaging their audience, primarily the youth, in a narrative which revolved around the idea that, 'the nature of British democracy' was one of failure. Yanamoto et al (2017) found that cynicism like this, did not yield in disengagement from politics but rather, it, 'foster[ed]', a sense of desire to create change. In evaluation, social media is only a means of venting and publicising the original disaffection held by the electorate - disaffection which has been created by the political class.

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